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SORCEROUS STABBER
ORPHEN
THE WAYWARD JOURNEY

11. SINK INTO MY DREAM, PARADISE! (ACT 1)



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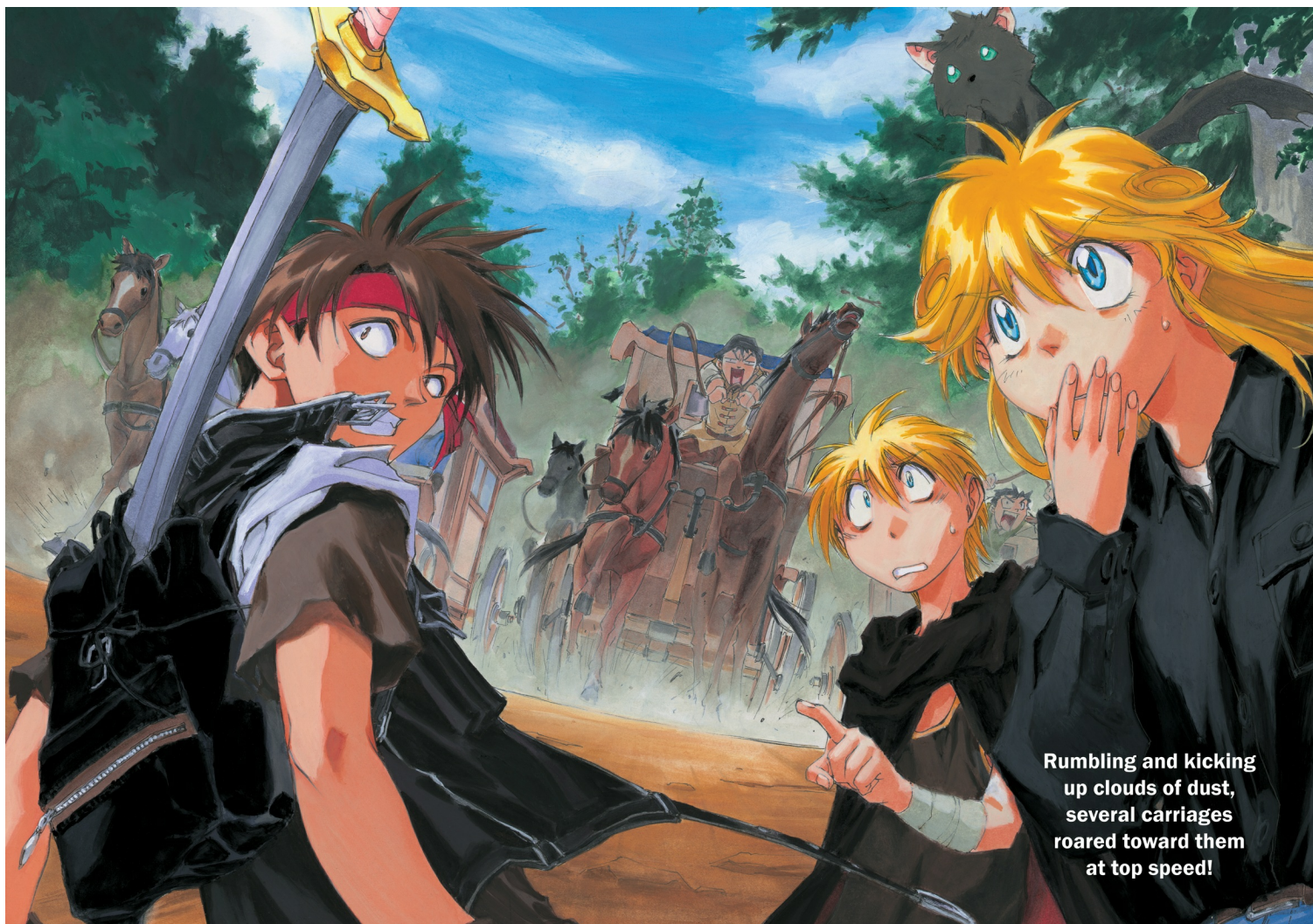
SORCEROUS STABBER
ORPHEN
THE WAYWARD JOURNEY



*"This happens,
you morooon!"*
Orphen shouted
at the top of his
lungs, throwing
Dortin with all his
might at Vulkan.



***"You're not
getting away!"***
Orphen ran after
the arsonist!



Rumbling and kicking
up clouds of dust,
several carriages
roared toward them
at top speed!

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Prologue

“What’s going on?! What’s going on?!”

Those screams just kept repeating... until they were swallowed up by the roiling water and faded away in it.

“Sheena! You have to run! We were betrayed! He betrayed us!”

She opened her eyes and looked at it. No, maybe she just felt like she was looking at it. It was like a dream, where she remembered looking at something, but she couldn’t remember what it was she’d seen.

“Is that not it?! What is it?! Dammit—”

She didn’t understand anything. Something inside her eyes was swaying. Swaying and sinking like a glass ball swept up in a current of water.

A hellish heat made it hard to even breathe. She couldn’t move. Her heart felt like it was pounding hard, but she was just standing still, the pain in her chest feeling like it belonged to someone else.

The pain in my chest...? She thought to herself, shocked. In all this roaring noise, she couldn’t feel any pain. Or hear any words. She could think of nothing, not even her fate.

That’s right.

She stared at the sight in front of her, forgetting to even blink, as it was carved into her broken heart, her broken memories. Carved strong, and deep.

This is pain! Harsh pain. A wound that would not heal. She shuddered at the unending regret caused by her actions—her inaction?—no, her actions. Pain almost of death, like being burned by flames, that left her unable to breathe. Pain almost of death, like being struck by a rod without an opportunity to give an excuse for herself. A blade thrust through her throat, piercing through her skin, her emotions burrowing through a lukewarm sensation, damaging her nerves, severing her tendons, cold metal almost freezing her bones. Such was

the pain she endured. She'd seen all sorts of pain before. No, she'd seen people suffering all sorts of pain.

But she came to know it herself for the first time now.

This is pain!

"Sheena! Run! Run—"

Run. Run. His words repeated endlessly.

"Run! Run! Ru—"

—n. Run. Run. Ru—

"—n!"

She screamed his name, but no sound came from her mouth. No, she hadn't screamed his name. She'd just screamed. The man was too far away now. He'd never come back. That alone, she understood so well it hurt.

Pain. This is pain.

The pain in her throat. The song she'd always sung in the bar. Remembering that at the last moment also caused her pain.

"Run!"

The pain of hearing that voice. The pain of not being able to forget. Her brain screamed at the ringing in her ears amid the thundering noise. That, too, was pain.

Sheena cried out, tears spilling from her eyes. She'd yelled before. She'd cried before. But, now that she thought about it, she'd never done both at the same time... To do both at the same time—to cry. Words like a poem. The pain of reciting them.

Chapter I: A Hot Spring Inn with No Hot Spring

Some believe that the reason there is no volcanic belt on the Kiesalhiman continent is because the Celestials, who lived underground, disliked subterranean heat and modified the continent to rid it of such things.

They believe this because there are parts of the continent that could not have been formed without volcanoes, and because the Celestial dragons that ruled the continent in the past had more than enough power to make such modifications. Either way, the truth of the matter was sealed away in the distant past, far beyond human recollection.

And it wasn't like anyone needed to know, really.

The study of history was nothing but a source of amusement for scholars, and no more meaningful than that. That was the general opinion of most people on the continent, in any case.

Of course, there were plenty who disagreed with that sentiment. Such as the scholars themselves, for one.



“It’s no exaggeration to say that humanity’s very future is on the line with this work. Don’t you think so, Researcher Nosapp?”

“Yes... I suppose you’re right, Chief Researcher Conrad.” Nosapp gave a noncommittal nod as he trekked up the steep mountain path. He did have some counter-arguments—for instance, to him, the fact that the straps of his pack were digging into his shoulders was a much more pressing issue than the elucidation of history—but complaining of such a thing wouldn’t be very mature. Though he probably should have made the bag waterproof. Thanks to last night’s rain, the leather pack was not only strangely heavy, but it was also giving off a smell that was making his head hurt.

The fall mountains were great for sightseeing, but if you had no interest in such things, it was just stupid to leave the chilly ground and head up into just-

plain-cold altitudes. It was a sneak peek of winter. That made a pretty good catchphrase, he supposed. People craved summer in spring; they waited eagerly for fall in summer; in fall, they dreamed of winter; and in winter, they froze to death.

“It’s incredible, truly. We’ll have to thank the academy. We’re doing important work, satisfying our own curiosity, we get to see such beautiful scenery, and it’s a workout, too. Oh, and, as a nice little bonus, we get paid—ah, it’s been difficult trying to pay my daughter’s tuition.”

“I suppose so, Chief Researcher.” Nosapp feigned agreement. They *were* getting paid, but it was not as a bonus.

Does he understand that? Nosapp thought to himself as he watched the chief researcher’s hunched back before him. He could hardly believe the body lumbering up the mountain path before him had the stamina of a middle-aged man, but it certainly had the looks of one. Although the chief researcher was only carrying a small bag in his hand, so maybe that put him on equal footing with Nosapp, who was a year away from 30, and his heavy backpack. When he thought about it that way, he figured he didn’t have to feel ashamed that he was losing steam faster than the middle-aged man in front of him.

In any case, Conrad—the accursed name of the chief researcher—went from cheerfully looking about at his surroundings to suddenly looking far off into the distance before muttering, “My daughter’s eighteen now.”

I know. You tell me that every day, Nosapp thought to himself, fed up, but the chief researcher had never once noticed his irritation.

“It’s a strange thing, Researcher Nosapp. As a person ages, he really understands more and more how important money is. But then he uses that money for a person who has no idea of that importance. How much do you think it cost to enroll my daughter in her new school? I had to give up on having my suits tailored.”

Why don’t you just lose some weight, then? Nosapp kept the thought to himself.

Conrad went on, talking by himself. “Well, the suits hardly matter. The problem is the cigarettes. People who *don’t* do it say it’s bad for your body, it’s

suicidal, the people who *do* do it are inferior to us, so they should listen to our warnings *not* to do it, and they *don't* listen to them *because* they do it, because they're *addicted*, and all sorts of things like that. Do you understand, Researcher Nosapp?"

"I suppose you're right, Chief Researcher." Nosapp went ahead and nodded even though Conrad had lost him at around the fifth "it."

But cigarettes, huh...? Hearing the word just when he was starting to want something to put in his mouth, Nosapp got even more irritated. He had to hold the straps of his pack with both hands, so he'd been going for hours in a situation where he couldn't smoke even if he wanted to.

Well, there's nothing I can do about that. And the Chief Researcher is putting up with it, too—

However, just then, Conrad pulled a cigarette out of his pocket and casually lit it. He took a deep breath in and exhaled a fragrant smoke.

I'll kill him. Nosapp decided.

Unaware of the other man's musings, Conrad puffed out another breath of sweet-smelling smoke. He smiled and kept on talking, eyes crinkling in satisfaction.

"Ahh, sweet bliss—better yet, there's no one around right now to make any comments on it. But anyway, what were we talking about, again? Oh, that's right. The future of humanity."

Nosapp nodded wordlessly, though he wasn't at all sure that that was in fact what they had been talking about. There was no reason for him to disagree, though. Or rather, he had no obligation to.

"The past is a legacy, each bit of it, from beginning to end. A legacy for the future. Though it could be both inheritance and liability. The same can be said of the past on a personal scale. Young people are ashamed of shame itself, but once you're older, you became ashamed of the fact that you didn't shame yourself enough as a young person. That you didn't leave yourself the legacy of your experience. And this is only the proper way to feel. Do you understand, Researcher Nosapp?"

“I suppose so, Chief Researcher.”

“It’s truly dull to be with someone who never learned the way to shame themselves or make up for that shame. No one can become great from shame, but they can become a proper person at the very least... Do you understand? Researcher Nosapp.”

“I suppose you’re right, Chief Researcher.”

“But youths tend to be fastidious. They don’t understand what shame is until they become adults. It’s the same with the value of money. Do you understand, Researcher Nosapp?”

Three times in a row might be bad. Nosapp was still possessed of the courtesy to at least realize that.

But he still couldn’t care less, so he nodded. “I suppose so, Chief Researcher.”

He really couldn’t care less, but Conrad went on unperturbed, almost like he was giving a lecture. It seemed to be coming to an end, though. He turned around and remarked to Nosapp, “By the way, I’m not bad-mouthing my daughter.”

“Uh huh...” Nosapp nodded noncommittally. On this long mountain climb, pretty much everything was meaningless to him.

The cold air up on the mountain chilled the sweat on Nosapp’s brow, giving him goosebumps. He looked around him. Mountains. All he could see was the mountain scenery. Ledgeborne was a famous mountainous region. The real autumn colors were still a little ways away, but there was a dark color starting to take hold in the mountain greenery. The wind was perfectly frigid. If this was really a volcanic region, then even at this altitude, it shouldn’t be this cold.

“Just wonderful...”

He could hear Conrad stretching and making a yawn-like expression of amazement. He’d finished his cigarette, apparently.

Sticking the butt into a portable ashtray, he gave Nosapp a sunny smile. “Wonderful. It’s a paradise cut off from the surface world up here. The quiet mountain and forest, the pleasant sky and breeze, laughter, screams...”

...

“Hm?”

“Huh?”

Conrad and Nosapp exchanged a glance, both making a confused sound. It was true, they did seem to be able to hear laughter and screams coming from somewhere or another...

“Monkeys, maybe? I hear there are a lot of them in this area,” Conrad said, mystified.

Nosapp, once again, nodded. “Probably something like that.”

“Mm... Well, it matters not. Let’s press on. I’m starting to tire. You must be too, Researcher Nosapp.”

“I suppose so, Chief Researcher.” The steep mountain path had made pretty much everything from the soles of his feet up to his back cramp up.

Nosapp shook his head. *Honestly, who made this stupid path? Wonder what it’s called to the locals*, he thought.

He came up with his own names for it:

The Stairs of Hell Up to Heaven.

Up Up Up Up Uphill Road.

The Path of Penance.

A Full Course Meal of Muscle Pain.

Perfect for those who carry an immeasurable grudge against their back!

Seeing something on the side of the path, Nosapp began to change his mind. Maybe the path wasn’t so rough after all.

What he’d found was an old signpost.

“End of the Happy Hiking Course

Rest stop 80m ahead: Ledgeborne Hot Spring Village”



“Waaahahahahahahahaha! It’s finally time to pay the piper, you shitty debt collector! Pay your taxes quickly and fairly, come forward and let the Bulldog of Masmaturia, the Great Vulcano Volkan smush you flat under his mighty hand!”

“Aaaaah! Help meeeee!”

“Hah hah hah! How long have I waited for this day! Looks like my repellant relationship with you comes to an end today! You’ve been able to escape my blade of justice through nothing but the devil’s luck, but that ends today! To be, err, more specific, I’m gonna finish you off in a long and thin way... I’ll give you ten seconds, now become long and thin!”

“Gyaaaaaaaaaaa!”

“...”

Listening to the laughter and screams, Orphen watched the dwarf puff his chest out on the edge of a cliff. A detailed explanation of their history alone could probably fill several books, but to put it simply, dwarves were an indigenous species of the continent. They were driven to the southernmost edge of the continent when the dragons arrived, and it was rare to see them outside of their self-governed territory.

They were much smaller than humans, never growing taller than 130 centimeters, but had stout frames due to their sturdy skeletal structures. They sometimes looked like children because of this. Because they lived in the frigid region of Masmaturia, closed off thanks to the dragons’ power, it was common to see them wearing fur cloaks.

The dwarf in front of Orphen—Volkan—was laughing loudly in a cocky pose, hands on his hips. He had a weathered sword at his hip.

Next, Orphen looked down at the other dwarf, who was dangling from one of his hands like a kitten. There were only a few differences in his appearance from Volkan’s. One, he was wearing thick glasses; two, he had no sword; and three, he was flailing both arms and legs, crying and screaming.

The dwarf dangling by the scruff of his neck—Dortin—was beside himself, wailing. “Aaaaaaah! He’s gonna kill meeeee!”

“Uhh...” Orphen muttered, quietly. There was something that didn’t sit right

with him.

Everything the 20-year-old was wearing was black, other than the bandanna across his forehead. There was almost nothing distinguishing about his physique. He had perfectly average dark hair, dark eyes, a medium build, and no visible scars. That was probably why the silver pendant hanging from his neck stood out. It was a crest of a one-legged dragon wrapped around a sword. The symbol of a sorcerer who'd studied at the foremost learning institute for black sorcery on the continent, the Tower of Fangs. It was, in essence, the symbol of a sorcerer of the highest caliber.



However, right now, he was just standing there absentmindedly. Scratching his head with his free left hand, he said in a grumbling tone, “There’s something I don’t quite get here...”

“Heh!” The spirited exclamation came, naturally, from Volkan. He spread his arms wide and said, at a strange 45-degree angle, “It’s a heavy burden for your poor fool’s brain to comprehend, I’m sure... you can’t even admit your own loss to yourself, can you?!”

“Let me just get things straight here. The order of events, from the top, are: first, you suddenly fell out of a tree and came at me with your sword, right?”

“Indeed!” The dwarf nodded with all of his might. “My perfect surprise attack dealt a huge blow to you before you even had time to realize it!”

“I see. To me, it looked more like you just happened to slip off the branch you were on while you were stealing acorns from a squirrel’s nest.”

“Hmph. Such may be the loser’s account of the event.”

“And then, what happened next?”

“After you were taken by surprise, I, the Bulldog of Masmaturia, hacked at you in a mighty slash that hardly seems like it could have come from my beautiful, elegant blade!”

“Uh huh, so you were having a dream about that while you were rolling around on the ground, flailing about and trying to get your sword out of its sheath?”

“Of course, even heroes can make miscalculations. My surprise attack may have succeeded, but the blundering reinforcements to my glorious army changed the course of the battle for worse—”

“Oh? That’s how the dramatization of Dortin falling down on you after you finally managed to stand up goes, eh?”

“I cursed the incompetence of all those who are not me, and beat a hasty temporary retreat...”

“Well, I guess I gotta admit I was kinda impressed by your vitality with the way you kept running around even while my sorcery scorched you black again

and again.”

“However! Turning the tables in a crisis is the work of a great hero! I cunningly moved the stage of our battle to this perilous cliff!”

“It is, indeed, perilous. But from where I’m standing, you’re the one who’s cornered here...”

“Thinking to give him the opportunity for a valorous death, I generously allowed my brother to lead the charge!”

“Uh huh. He came running at me crying. It was so pathetic, I couldn’t help taking him hostage.”

“And now! When it’s the end of the line for you, I’m graciously allowing you to surrender! Of course, even if you do, I’ll still kill you by sticking you to the edge of a ring.”

Orphen could think of no response, so he went silent. He closed his eyes. Then immediately opened them. He took a breath, then exhaled it. The only thing that came to his mind was the vague question, “Why?” *Why am I here? Why am I doing this? Why is the sky so vast? Why are mailboxes red? ...Probably because it makes them stand out.*

This time he took a deep breath and exhaled for a long time—a sigh, in other words—and muttered, “I see. I get the gist of it.”

“Mhm. And what happens now that you get the gist?”

“*This* happens, you morooon!” Orphen shouted at the top of his lungs, lifting Dortin up and throwing him with all his might at Volkan.

“Dogyaaaaa?!” The scream came from one of the two, though Orphen wasn’t sure which, as Dortin crashed into Volkan and the two of them went toppling down the cliff.

Aaaaaaaaaaah... The scream reverberated through the air, cutting out at times. The gaps became longer and longer until they gradually faded into silence.

Orphen exhaled a short breath. “It’s over... Everything’s finally over...”

“Umm...” a voice suddenly piped up.

Orphen looked up to find a boy standing near him. The boy gave off a somewhat unreliable air, and was... fourteen or so, Orphen recalled. Blond hair framed his face, where there was a troubled smile and what appeared to be a bit of a cold sweat.

“Hey! You’re late, Majic.” Orphen adjusted his posture as he addressed the boy, Majic.

The black cloak he wore really didn’t suit him, but Majic himself didn’t seem particularly bothered by that fact. He had to have realized, in any case.

Majic nodded and said, “It’s impossible to keep up with you when you’re chasing those two dwarves. You were running at a really incredible pace. You looked really excited, too.”

“No, I don’t think I was really having that much fun...”

“Claiomh was mad, you know. You left all your luggage behind and ran off, Master.”

“Hmm,” Orphen grunted noncommittally and crossed his arms. He took a look at Majic and asked, “How mad did she seem?”

“How mad?”

“Come on, we came up with it yesterday, right? The Self-Centered Eruption Girl Danger Rating.”

“Oh, that... Well, let’s see...” Majic crossed his arms in the same way as Orphen. He furrowed his brow in thought for a moment before settling on, “‘Caution Needed,’ I guess?”

“Caution, eh...? She’ll blow up suddenly even on Caution sometimes, though...”

“She blows up pretty often on ‘Some Caution Needed’ as well...”

“And even on ‘No Caution Needed,’ it’s not like you’re always safe...”

“There’s no meaning in these, is there?”

“Guess not,” Orphen readily admitted. He looked at the sky and suddenly muttered, “Why is it that we have to suffer like this?”

“It’s a mystery.”

“Ahaha...”

“...And what is it you two are chatting about, hmm~?”

The words came from a girl with blonde hair down to her mid-back, forcing her high-pitched voice to go as low as it could. She wore a thick, charcoal-colored shirt, probably because of their mountain-climbing, and her usual jeans. The shirt looked like it was a size too big, with plenty of extra space under her arms. She had a small backpack with an unnaturally long piece of metal sticking out of it. In fact, it looked like the part sticking out of the backpack was longer than the part inside of it. It had beautiful silver lines, and a shape like a person standing tall in prayer. It was a sword.

However, when Orphen turned around, the first thing he saw wasn’t her, but a small black creature that looked like a puppy, seated atop her small blonde head. It only “looked like” a puppy because it was in fact a completely different type of creature.

As the creature opened its mouth wide in a yawn, beneath it, the girl—Claiomh—pursed her lips and said, “I’ve never gotten mad for no reason, have I?!”

“You sure?” Orphen exchanged a glance with Majic and cocked his head.

Majic was just averting his eyes and maintaining a neutral expression in an effort to avoid getting involved.

Nevertheless, Claiomh shoved herself in between the two of them, pushing Majic away in the process, and stretched up tall to look into Orphen’s eyes.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“I think my meaning was pretty clear.”

“I don’t think you’re one to talk about being short-tempered, Orphen!”

“When have I ever been short-tempered?!”

“Aaah! See! You always start strangling people right away! I’m gonna bite you, you know! I’ll bite you!”

“Erm...” Majic held his hand up beside the two of them and Claiomh swiftly turned her head to him.

She scowled at him and told him, “If you say we’re two of a kind, I’ll hit you.”

“Ugh... I’ll stay quiet.” Majic backed up in retreat.

Orphen let go of Claiomh with a sigh. The air at their altitude was chilly. Hugging himself as a cold wind suddenly blew, he shuddered and remarked, “Right, my cloak was back with my stuff.” He regretted not putting it on earlier.

“Come on, we gotta hurry up and go get it,” Claiomh said smugly.

“Wouldn’t have to go to the trouble if you’d just brought it with you.”

“Well, I brought *my* stuff.” She was practically haughty at this point. She indicated her backpack and the puppy (look-alike) on her head with an air of triumph. These were in fact the only things she’d brought with her on the mountain path. She’d left most of her luggage, anything bulky, down at the town at the base of the mountain.

Orphen had done the same, but when he’d spotted those two dwarves, he’d thrown his bag to the side of the road.

“Cripes, nothing good ever comes from running into those two. Now I gotta waste time going back down.”

“I dunno if you can complain about them after knocking the two of them off of a cliff...”

Orphen decided to ignore Majic’s comment, looking around the area and grumbling to himself. They were standing on a cliff that was a little ways off the path up the mountain. It gave them a nice view, but the winds whirling up from the bottom of the cliff were not making it easy to stay warm.

Rubbing the goosebumps on his arms, Orphen started back to the path they’d originally been on. There must have been people who passed through this area a lot, because there were various little paths resembling animal trails branching off from the main route. Orphen walked down one such path now.

Pattering after him, Claiomh asked, “We’re almost there though, right? The hot springs?”

“Probably. If the map’s right, I don’t think it’ll take another five minutes.”

“We’ve climbed up pretty far. Not that we had a choice, since we don’t have the money to ride in a carriage.” Claiomh was smiling, her mood apparently improved. She jogged down ahead of Orphen, holding the straps of her pack. When she was three steps ahead of him, she looked back at him over her shoulder. The sword sticking out of her backpack swayed.

“What was the place called, again? You picked it out, right, Orphen?”

“Yeah. What was it... Uhh, it was kind of contradictory... Oh, right.” Orphen put his arms behind his head and remembered. “The Branch of the Forest Lodge, I think.”

“An inn with a hot spring should be nice, right? It’s my first time going to one.” That seemed to be the only reason her mood had improved. Patting the black puppy on her head, she said, “It’s your first time too, right, Leki? I wonder if he’ll be okay with hot water.”

“Who knows. I can’t imagine there was anything as nice as a hot spring in Fenrir’s Forest, at the very least,” Orphen muttered, observing the creature named Leki as its eyes opened and closed every time Claiomh patted it. Observing its eyes. That pair of little, round, green eyes. The eyes which were only found on the beings capable of wielding powerful sorcery, dragons.

Leki was a young deep dragon. Although, since the creatures, also known as Abyssal Wolves, grew to four or five meters long in adulthood, it would be more accurate to call him a baby. Orphen didn’t know much about the biology of deep dragons. In fact, it wasn’t an exaggeration to say that the biology of these beings, one of the most powerful of all the dragon races, was a complete unknown to humanity as a whole.

“It’s my first time, too. Hot water just comes up from the ground, right?” Majic piped up, trotting after Claiomh.

Orphen shrugged his shoulders without stopping. “I’m no different. I’ve heard of them before, and wanted to come, but... Come to think of it, everyone at the Tower treated me like an idiot for saying that. I wonder why.”

“Because they’re in the east?”

“...Maybe.” Orphen nodded in agreement.

Claiomh blinked, puzzled. “What do you mean?”

“Well, most of the people on the west of the continent treat the eastern side as unknown territory, an undeveloped wilderness. And the people in the east think the western side is a lawless frontier where sorcery reigns supreme.”

“...People really think such extreme things?” Claiomh frowned, sounding doubtful.

Orphen grimaced, stopping his expression before it became a wry smile and responded to the questioning girl, “Well, a privileged Totokanta girl like you has probably heard of all the technological advancements they have in the capital these days, but outside of the city, nobody has access to that sort of information. If you live in some backwater town that hasn’t gotten any new information in the last hundred years, then of course you’re going to think the same as people did a hundred years ago. Tefurem might have the sharpest ears in the west, but... there’s only so much even they can do. It’s not like sorcerers travel between the east and the west all that much.”

“Why not?”

“Because east and west are divided. There’s the Kimluck Church up north, Fenrir’s Forest in the middle, and Masmaturia to the south. There’s no way to get over there except by sea. It’s only natural there are prejudices on both sides, since there’s no information exchange between them.”

Majic suddenly spoke up again, as if he’d just thought of something. “But you’ve been to the east, haven’t you, Master?”

Orphen turned to Majic and hesitated slightly before giving him a vague nod. “Yeah... just once, though. But there was a lot going on then, so I didn’t really have the time to sightsee or anything like that.”

“What do you mean?”

“Five years ago, I went to the capital with a bit of a problematic fanfare, so the royal sorcerers started to monitor—”

Before finishing, he arrived at the main path. It wasn’t paved or anything, but

it had hardened from many footfalls so that it was an easy path to walk. It was pretty wide too, since carriages also used it.

The mountain air. His five senses basked in the scent of the forest. The sky seemed overwhelmingly vast and high. There were some thin clouds, and a soundless breeze blowing. That was all well and good, but...

“Huh?” Orphen blinked. This was the path they were on before. He was sure about that. There was a branch on the edge of the road that had broken off of a tree nearby. The dwarves had fallen down with it, causing the earlier commotion, but...

“Your stuff...” Majic muttered beside him, tone conveying the same dazed surprise Orphen felt.

He’d thrown his bag down on the middle of the path. One worn bag—he’d bought it dirt-cheap at the town at the base of the mountain.

The bag was gone.



“Can’t bury you on this cold mountain. I can’t bury your corpse here...” Eris Shosky sang to herself quietly as she gazed at the three-dimensional map in the middle of the hall. When she didn’t want to do anything, she was always here. “I’ll give you this finger. Just believe there’s warm blood under the cold skin...”

“What’s that song you’re singing?” A voice came from behind her.

She answered without turning around. “You used to sing it all the time, didn’t you, Mama... Were the words different?”

“You can’t sing about corpses and blood at a bar. Geez, you’ll never grow any brains in that head of yours no matter how old you get, will you?”

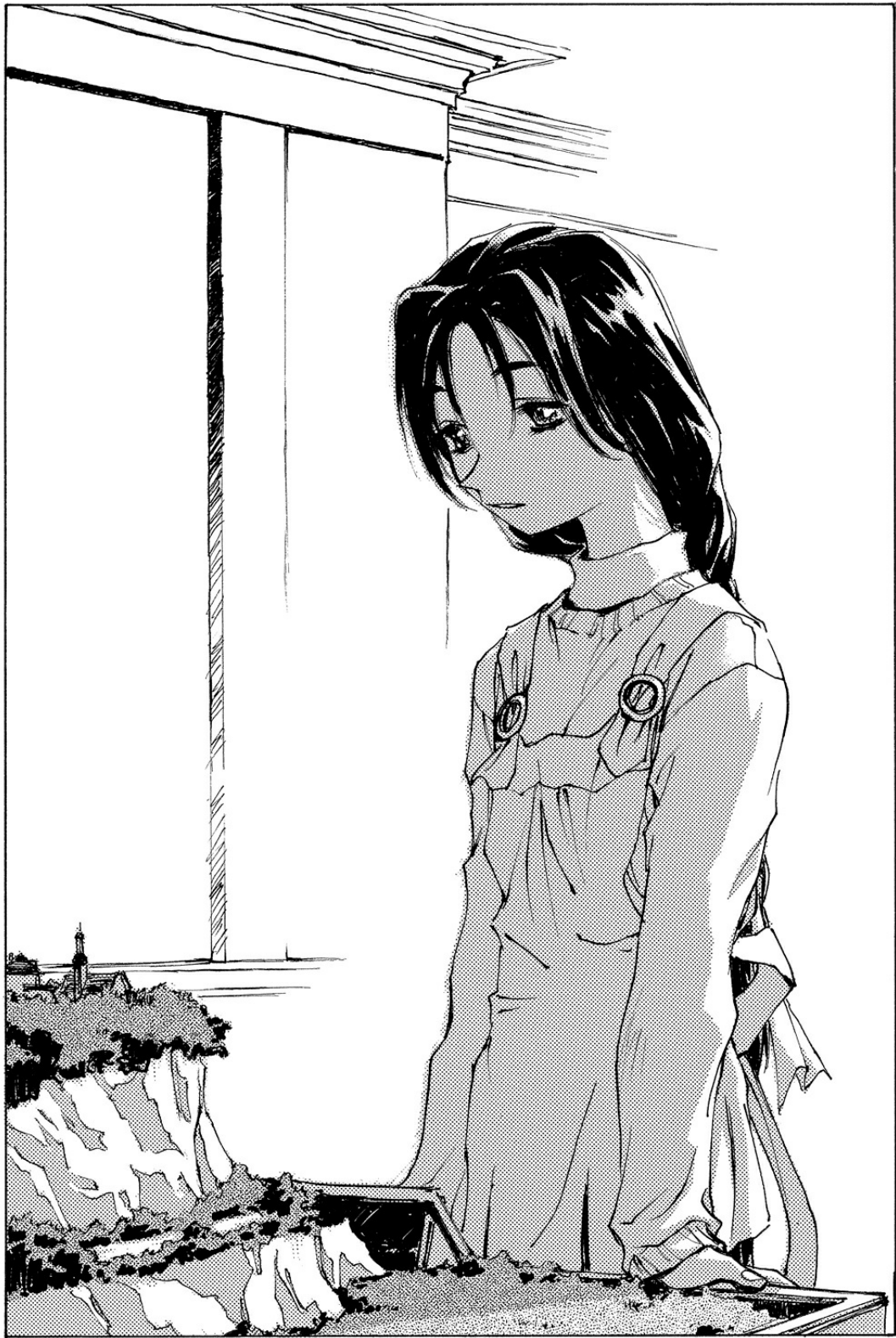
Eris didn’t answer her, sighing quietly instead. It wasn’t because she was offended. It was because she was forced to agree. *I am an idiot*, she thought glumly.

She took pride in the fact that her apron was always spotless. She stroked said apron as she sat down on the nicest couch in the hall.

The map, needless to say, represented the terrain in the surrounding area. It was a model crafted from clay, dirt, and wood. It was a general approximation of the region known as the Ledgeborne Mountain Range. Eris didn't know who'd created it. Her father, she guessed. She had no way to be sure, though, since she'd never asked anyone.

With a short exhalation, she stood up. She felt a hint of fatigue creeping out from behind her eyes. It wasn't enough to make her dizzy, but she felt almost like her consciousness separated from her body for a split second. In that split second, it seemed like her consciousness stood faster than her body, and was looking down on her body from above. She felt annoyed watching her own sluggish movements. It wasn't that she wanted to be quick or anything, yet being so slow felt somehow like a waste.

Her body was 20 now. All that meant was that it had been with her for 20 years. When she'd told a friend of hers that she worried that her collarbones stood out too much, she'd been laughed at. "Just hide them, then," the friend had said, and, "If that's all it takes to solve it, it's not much of a problem, is it?" She was forced to agree. It didn't make her any less annoyed, though.



She could feel her braided hair hitting against her back as it moved. She turned to her mother. Her mother was a little shorter than her, with hair more grey than black now. She stared at her mother for three seconds. Her mother didn't seem to notice as she silently mopped the floor.

"Cleaning?" Eris ventured a question.

Her mother responded bluntly without looking up from her task. "We're finally getting some new guests today."

"And how much are they gonna pay...?" Eris shook her head with an incredulous snort. She put a hand on her hip and looked down at her mother.

Her mother didn't answer her, just continuing to mop silently.

Biting her lip, Eris groaned. "All the people with money go to Lotz's place."

"If you have time to complain, maybe you should go try to attract some customers."

When her mother finally responded to her, it was to say that. Eris wasn't angry, but her disappointment only grew. Of course, it wasn't like anything would actually change if she showed her emotions on her face.

"I know."

She turned around then, having some sort of premonition. From the largest window in the hall, she could see the forest, the path, and the entrance to the inn.

Two men were approaching the usually deserted (Eris was forced to bitterly admit) inn. One man was tall, wearing a dark suit and carrying a briefcase. The other was scrawny, with glassy eyes. This one wore mountain climbing clothes, and from the state of them, it looked like he'd been made to forage for wild plants or something.

"They're here again..." Eris ground her teeth, grasping the front of her apron. The wrinkled fabric tightened around her body slightly.

"Doesn't matter how many times they come," her mother muttered.

This time, Eris was the one to ignore her, leaving the hall instead. The

entrance was just next to it. Eris looked over the entrance—her mother must have just cleaned it, since there wasn't a speck of dust in sight—and plucked a wooden stick for stickball from an umbrella stand. She waited for the men with a stony face.

A knock.

She let out a shaky breath. Her shoulders trembled. She gripped the slightly curved stick hard enough to leave fingerprints on it and took a step forward.

Steeling herself, she opened the door. The two faces she'd been expecting to see were waiting for her there, outside the inn.

"Hey, how's it going?" The man in the dark suit gave her a nod with a polite smile.

The man behind him, in the mountain-climbing clothes, peered into the inn without greeting her, eyelids half-closed. He looked pretty young.

Eris just barely stopped herself from spitting on them. She cursed her environment—if only she was outside.

"You're here again? You're so persistent." She mustered up all the ire she was capable of expressing and stuck her chest out as far as she could, too. "No matter how many times you come, we're only going to have the same answer for you."

"Well, our boss is never gonna be happy unless we get a different answer."

"Your boss can drop dead for all I care," she spat at the man in the dark suit. Her legs weren't shaking and her voice didn't sound frightened. She was relieved to realize she could hold out for another five minutes. *Thank you, God...*

"You bitch, what'd you—" the younger man suddenly cut in, but the man in the dark suit held out his hand to stop him.

"You don't need to comment." He raised his eyebrows in exasperation. "I don't think this is a bad deal for either of us, personally..."

"Well, you've asked us over and over again, and we've said no every time. You guys think you can do whatever you want just because Lotz—"

“Our boss—”

“Excuse me...” Someone suddenly interrupted, and Eris swallowed what she was about to say. She looked to the side to find a plump man peering into the inn, standing in what was a blind spot from within the entrance.

The man’s sudden intrusion had been a surprise to the man in the dark suit as well. He and his companion were blinking with surprise.

Eris didn’t know what was going on for a moment, but she finally remembered. They were getting customers today. It hardly ever happened, so it hadn’t occurred to her right away.

While she was standing there dazedly, the plump man began to make his way in through the entrance. He didn’t seem to mean them any harm, but he naturally had to push his way past the man in the dark suit and his companion.

The newcomer smiled and asked, “Is this the Branch of the Forest? I’m Conrad—I should have a reservation.”

“Oh... yes. Is it just you?” Eris nodded, flustered. She reached out to take the man’s bag, then realized she was holding a stick and hit it behind her back, then realized that the man didn’t even have any luggage.

Then, from behind Conrad, another rather thin man appeared. This one was breathing hard, a ridiculously large pack on his back. He was covered in sweat despite the cool weather, and his face had turned a dark color with exhaustion.

“Him, too. His name’s Nosapp. He’s my assistant.” Conrad rubbed his belly as he introduced the younger man.

Eris wasn’t sure how to respond, so she just nodded for the time being. She glanced at the other two men to find them walking off already, their backs turned to her. She knew they weren’t stupid enough to start something in front of some tourists, anyway.

“Can I ask where the room is? We’re not in a hurry or anything, but I get the sense that Nosapp is nearing his limits...”

“Oh, right, I’m sorry... Umm, may I take your bag?” Eris asked, fully aware that she would never be able to carry the bag that Nosapp was carrying.

“Hahaha.” Conrad laughed cheerily. “Don’t trouble yourself. Nosapp is paid to carry our equipment. Isn’t that right, Researcher Nosapp?”

“I suppose... I am... Chief Researcher...” Nosapp grumbled, with a... well, to put it lightly, he had a look in his eyes like he was ready to kill Conrad at any moment.

Eris put her best customer service smile on, but she was already certain...
They don’t look like they have much money.

Can’t bury you on this cold mountain.

Can’t bury your corpse here.

Guests with money never stayed with them. Why would they? It was a hot spring inn with no hot spring.

Chapter II: Guests with No Money

“What’s going on?!” Orphen shouted, looking left and right.

The mountain path was deserted.

“It’s not here! It’s not here! It’s not there, or that way, or anywhere around here!” He ran around peering into bushes, underneath trees, and even underneath large rocks.

Nearby, Majic and Claiomh stood around absentmindedly.

“Umm, Master...”

“Orpheen. Give up on your bag, already. Come on, let’s get going.”

“Are you two stupid?!” Orphen leapt up and waved his arms about.

“Everything I had was in that bag, including the money to pay for the inn! Even if we make it there, we’re gonna end up camping out anyway!”

“Huh?!”

“It’s not here! It’s not here! It’s not there, or that way, or anywhere around here!”

“...As long as you understand.” Orphen nodded, satisfied that the two of them were now freaking out as much as he was. He also felt a bit sad, however.

Cocking his head, Orphen groaned. “How could this happen, though? It’s not like the wind could blow it away... which means somebody must have taken it.”

“Maybe somebody passing by picked it up, thinking someone had lost it?” Majic suggested.

Orphen nodded. It was a reasonable idea. “Right,” he said, and looked left and right—up and down the mountain. “But whether they picked it up out of good will or not, they could only either go up or down...”

“Then let’s go up,” Claiomh said, poking her head into Orphen’s field of view. “We don’t know which way they went, but I wouldn’t want to go back down

after coming this far.”

“...I guess so.” Orphen scratched his cheek, looking up the mountain path.

They were in an area called the Ledgeborne Mountain Range. Nashwater, which was at the foot of this mountain, was just south of the Church-controlled region. The mountain range extended from the mid-sized, unremarkable town, and contained a hot spring district that was famous even on the east of the continent.

The wind blew past them. It was already a cold wind, but it felt even chillier in the deserted town. Orphen wondered why that was, but decided it wasn't a mystery worth pursuing. He was chilled to his very core as the cold seemed to seep deep into him.

The sky was beautiful at this altitude. And the town didn't look bad, either. Blue and white spread out above them, the cold wind stirring through both the sky and the town. The gentle, cold hand of the wind stroked the skin of each one of them.

For the time being, Orphen shuddered.

“Umm...” Next, he let a meaningless utterance escape his lips.

He glanced at his companions to find Majic and Claiomh standing stock-still, eyes wide. The arms slack at their sides expressed their emotions perfectly.

Majic was the first to open his mouth. “Master...” His utterance was just as meaningless as Orphen's had been.

Claiomh shot him a look to follow Majic up. “Orphen...” she said quietly. “Is this a ghost town?”

“...Of course not.” Orphen said something he by no means believed and turned back to the town.

They stood at the summit of the mountain trail—the entrance to the town, in other words. It wasn't like there was a wall around it or anything, but the town was still distinct from the surrounding forest. The buildings of the town were all tall, so they stood higher than the trees around it. This made the town just as

impressive, though the forest was much more vast. But the height of the buildings was really all the town had.

The town had a gentle slope to it like it hadn't been built on perfectly leveled ground. Some of the buildings were old, and some of them were new, but together they all fit the image of a sightseeing location. The roads were wide and the scenery was beautiful. There were signs with directions on the side of the road at several locations: this way to a hot spring inn, that way to a hot spring inn, hot spring inns over there and over there, too. There was clearly a theme.

Right next to the entrance of the town, there was a small building with a round roof that looked like a police station, but it was deserted. That was one of the reasons why the whole town seemed deserted to them. When a place that should always have a person is deserted, it makes the whole place seem empty.

Of course, the other reason was that the town appeared to be deserted.

Maybe it was just because of the cold wind, but there wasn't a single person out on the street. It was as if the street was just there for the wind to pass down it.

"I don't see any hot springs..." Claiomh said, looking here and there.

Orphen shrugged. "Well, you wouldn't want people watching you from here when you're in them. They're probably indoors."

"Aww, and I bought a swimsuit, hoping they'd be outdoors..."

Orphen didn't really think you were supposed to wear a swimsuit in a bath, but he decided not to say anything.

Instead, he stepped into the town. Unlike the mountain path they'd just been on, the streets of the town were paved properly. Of course, it was just stone paving, not asphalt or anything. He guessed that it was partly a matter of improving the town's aesthetic, and partly the simple reality that the equipment for laying asphalt would be difficult to bring all the way up here.



Orphen suddenly stopped, realizing something. “You bought a swimsuit? I thought you didn’t have any money.”

“Oh, look Orphen, when you pinch Leki’s tail, he walks on his hind legs!” she said, and actually did it, pinching the tail of Leki—the black puppy who was sleeping on her head. Leki blinked in surprise and stood up.

Orphen, of course, ignored this and peered into Claiomh’s eyes. “Is that your attempt at changing the subject? How many times have I told you to keep your hands off my wallet?” He glared at Claiomh’s blue eyes.

She just said, with complete sincerity, “Come on, it’s fine, isn’t it?”

“What’s fine?! Do you not understand how miserable it feels to open up your wallet and see that there’s less in it than there was before?!”

Claiomh’s expression changed. She pursed her lips, clenched her fists at her chest, and then waved those fists up and down, throwing a tantrum. “Well, you don’t give me an allowance!”

“Why the hell do I have to give you an allowance?!”

“Well, who else is gonna give me one?!”

“How should I know?! Earn your own money!”

“Boo, boo!”

Orphen decided to ignore her when she devolved into booing him with her thumbs down. He started heading into town again. When he noticed Majic glancing around, the boy caught on to his gaze and turned to him.

Letting his narrow shoulders drop, the boy said quietly, “I get kind of a bad vibe from this place... A tourist town like this should have at least one person out on the streets, right...?”

“Yeah. Sort of feels like the town’s been wiped out by an epidemic or something.”

“Don’t say something like that!” Claiomh shuddered and stepped back.

Orphen sighed and glanced around again. No matter which way he looked, the hot spring town was deserted. There was nothing, and no one, around.

Having nothing else to look at, Orphen turned his gaze skyward. The sun had just reached its zenith.

“It’s noon... Definitely not a time you’d expect no one to be out and about...”

Just as he muttered that, a heavy vibration echoed through the air, reverberating deep inside their ears. *Bong, bong, bong, bong...*

“...An alarm?” Orphen screwed his face up at the sudden sound of the bell. He didn’t know where it was coming from, but it had to originate in the town.

The bell continued.

“What is this? What is this?” Claiomh, looking surprised but also somewhat excited, put her backpack down and gripped the hilt of the sword sticking out of it.

“Will you chill?” Orphen just barely managed to stop her from drawing the sword.

Claiomh looked at him as if he was behaving very unexpectedly. “Whaddya mean?”

“Don’t just draw a sword for no reason!”

“What? But there is a reason. There’s an alarm.” Reluctantly letting go of the sword, Claiomh gestured vaguely to their surroundings. “Plus, the town’s kinda weird. It’s gotta be dangerous, right? We gotta protect ourselves, don’t we?♪”

“There’s no need for the ‘♪,’ is there?!” Orphen glared at Claiomh, who’d cheerfully clapped her hands together.

Deciding he should take possession of the backpack with Claiomh’s sword in it, Orphen shouldered the bag. “You’ll take any opportunity to draw your damn sword. If you walk around town in the middle of the day with a fricken’ sword, you’re not gonna be able to complain if you get arrested.”

“I wouldn’t get arrested. I haven’t done anything wrong.”

“Brandishing a blade around town is a crime!” Orphen shouted, and held his head. “Aaaah... I don’t care who it is or how they do it, just save me...”

“Sounds like something’s troubling you, Orphen. Want to talk about it?”

“Claiomh... I think Master might start crying if you say any more, so you might want to leave it at that.”

Shutting out the commentary coming from his two companions, Orphen weakly shook his head between his hands. “Uuugh... Why do I have to struggle with such stupid shit...”

“He’s muttering something,” Claiomh said, pointing at him—not that he was looking at her, but he assumed.

Orphen ignored her and went on, “Those damn weasels won’t return my money, like always—worse, I don’t think they’re ever even gonna *have* the money to give back to me. It’s so unlikely that I don’t even think ‘debt’ anymore when I see them.”

“Yeah, you seem to go for a physical attack before trying words lately,” Majic said with his arms crossed (again, Orphen assumed, since he wasn’t looking).

“And having a little beast that can turn the entire area to ash with a single look on her head has only encouraged that stupid girl to go on even more rampages.”

“Who’s going on rampages?”

“I’ve got a stupid apprentice who’s gotten awfully passionate about his studies lately, but despite that fact, he refuses to improve at all. It’s only made me have to look after him more, so it’s a net loss for me, really. I mean, it’s not like the money I get monthly for his tuition from Bagup is gonna increase at all.”

“Ugh... I’ll admit I’m not improving, but I don’t think you really help me with my studies enough to complain, Master.”

“Holy shit, my life sucks!” Orphen screamed, raising his face. He spun and looked at the other two, then thrust his finger out at each of them in turn. “And you two are to blame for everything that’s wrong with it! Everything you do causes me some kind of trouble! Can’t you two be more like... a gentle breeze, that doesn’t cause any lasting damage when it blows through?!”

“What’s with the sudden metaphor?”

“Quit worrying about that and just watch yourself to make sure nothing

happens, would you?! No blades and no dark magic from the devil dog, okay?!” he shouted, pointing at the devil dog—Leki—on Claiomh’s head. Leki’s nose twitched as he sniffed Orphen’s finger.

Pulling his finger back, Orphen went on, “I know! I’m gonna stop poking my nose into trouble from now on! Including cleaning up your messes! So from now on, I’m not a black sorcerer or an unlicensed moneylender! I’m gonna become just a normal citizen, who never gets trouble pins stuck in the board of my life!”

“Again with the weird metaphors.”

“Shut up! Agh! Get away from me! Stop looking at me with those eyes that say you’re just waiting for some trouble to start!”

“Hey! That’s not very nice! Don’t act like I’m some sort of harbinger of misfortune!”

“Umm, Master...”

“What?! You’re just as bad as she is, you know!”

“That’s not what I... uhh...”

Orphen finally came back to his senses. It might have been because he saw how pale Majic’s face was, and it might have been because of the shock to his system caused by Claiomh’s shrill voice. Maybe it was just because of how cold the wind was. The reason didn’t matter. In any case, Orphen came back to his senses and looked where Majic was pointing.

The boy was frozen, pointing in the direction they’d come from—the mountain path, in other words.

Claiomh also went silent and looked in that direction. She then muttered curiously, “What’s that...?”

Orphen knit his brows together in confusion. There was some sort of cloud of dust approaching from far in the distance down the mountain path. He also felt like he could hear a faint rumbling, though it was hard to tell, since the alarm was still blaring.

From the dust cloud appeared... several carriages. They rushed into the town

at an incredible speed. Flying past the trio almost close enough to graze them, the carriages all came to a sudden stop with a loud screech. Some of them even toppled over, horses and all. The carriage doors opened and their passengers flooded out of them.

Then came the second rumbling. They turned around and found that all of a sudden, people were flooding out into the streets of the town at an unbelievable pace. The people were of all ages and genders, but each one of them carried a colorful banner, with no exceptions.

Each banner was different. There were dozens of them, reading, “Carnegie’s Inn,” “Hotel Sally,” “Black’s White Horse Lodge,” “Beef House”... so colorful it almost hurt the eyes. There were just as many people running as fast as they could as there were flags. Each of them rushed forward with a perfect customer service smile.

“Wh...”

As they watched this, speechless, the two rumbles met in a head-on collision. All the people carrying banners rammed into the people getting out of the carriages at top speed.

And all of them exclaimed at the same time—though whether this was coincidence or not, Orphen couldn’t say—“Welcome to the Ledgeborne Hot Spring Village!”

From there, everything proceeded in a very orderly fashion.

When one sharply dressed gentleman stepped out of a carriage, another man holding a banner that read “Drive Inn” slid up to him, bowed, and recited swiftly, “Thank you for visiting the Ledgeborne Hot Spring Village today, sir! I’m sure you’re tired from your long journey! At our inn, you can bathe in our Miracle Spring—a hot spring, that is—at any time you like, 24 hours a day! Our rooms and meals are both first-class! Guaranteed to make this trip a memory you’ll never forget! Please, stay at our Drive Inn...”

In another location, a young man with a banner that read “Joy Controller” slung over his shoulder brushed back faded blond hair and struck a sort of unnatural pose. Giving a sidelong glance to a pair of girls who stepped excitedly out of a carriage, he said, “Hey, ladies... Let me be your shepherd, guiding you

lost lambs straight to paradise.” He even winked. The girls didn’t seem very impressed, though.

In yet another place, there was a thin man crying and prostrating himself on the ground in front of a young couple to block their way forward, and past him, a man with a face painted white was juggling ten or so knives, drawing the attention of some children.

And...

“Well, hello, little lady! You’ve got just the look of a refined young lady... or maybe you’re a princess on a secret journey? Haha.”

Orphen turned around, hearing a voice nearby, and found a man in a black suit chatting up Claiomh. The banner in his hand read “Lotz Group.” His voice made him sound like he was in his mid-thirties, but his face looked younger than that. He had a little scar above his left eye that he looked like he was trying to cover up with his bangs, but honestly, it kind of stood out a lot.

Claiomh answered the man honestly. “I’m not a princess.”

“Oh? Well, that’s too bad. But even if you were a princess, I’m confident we’d have a room that would satisfy you. What do you say, little lady? Ah, is this your younger brother here? Are the two of you on a trip together? Or are you with your parents? Oh, I thought that was a hat you had on, but it’s a cute little puppy, I see. What a surprise!”

Rattling all that off, the man reached out to Leki, who was curled up on Claiomh’s head. However, he swiftly pulled his fingers back when Leki bared a canine in response to his approaching hand.

Reaching up to comfort Leki, Claiomh shrugged and said, “All wrong. Majic’s not my brother, and I’m not here with my parents either. I’m here with Orphen, though.”

“Huh?”

“Orpheeen.” Claiomh turned to him and called him.

Orphen raised a hand silently.

The man gave him a look up and down, eyes slowly taking in his appearance.

And, as if he'd run out of fuel, the smile vanished from the man's face.

He turned around with an audible cluck of his tongue. "Dammit. Can't believe I talked to a poor person..." He left, muttering to himself.

There was silence for some time.

His brain was trying to form a coherent thought, but no words were coming to his mind.

For the time being, Orphen raised his head. He'd lowered it at some point. When he looked up, he locked eyes with another man holding a banner. It looked like the man had just let some potential customers escape.

Orphen went to smile at the man, thinking that he was about to smile at him. But the man, in but a single instant, flared just one nostril, tugged up just one side of his lips, and twitched just one of his eyebrows. In other words, he made a face expressing obvious disgust. And he spun on his heels without a word.

As Orphen stood there dazedly, he met eyes with another person. The woman, holding yet another banner, waved her hand at him after a single glance. In a "shoo" gesture.

The sea...

The sky...

He suddenly felt the urge to look at something blue.

"Hey." After standing there silently for a pretty long while, he finally turned to Claiomh and Majic. "Is there, like, an account balance or something written somewhere on my body?"

"Well, if you put it that way, I guess I would have to say there kind of is..."

"In your case, Master, I think it might be more that there's a sense of sorrow that emanates from you that brings to mind poverty."

"..."

"Oh! B-B-B-B-But I don't think there's any need to worry about it, really. It's true, you might be completely and utterly useless when it comes to money, but you have plenty of other good qualities, Orphen!"

“Y-Y-Y-Y-Yeah, that’s right, there’s no need to worry about it. I’m sure one day you’ll find something good enough about you to make up for how rude you are, and how you’re always breaking things right away, and how you’re surprisingly lazy, and how you have a nasty look in your eyes, and how you have absolutely no social standing!”

Clearly surprised by the fact that Orphen had crouched down to the ground and started aimlessly doodling in the dirt, his two companions hurriedly attempted to console him (though they failed completely at that).

Orphen held up his hand and stopped them. He sighed and stood back up. As he was patting the dirt off of his pants, he realized that the three of them were the only ones left in the area. The crowd of people that had been swarming the area had all moved into the town. And the carriages were all long gone, descending back down the mountain trail.

It was just... them.

Left behind amid the blowing wind, Orphen groaned, dumbfounded, “What was that...?”

“Attracting customers, looks like,” Claiomh muttered.

“I guess they’re famous for that here,” Majic said, pulling a travel guide from who-knows-where and reading from it. “Umm... It says here that there are so many hot spring inns that competition for customers is incredibly fierce.”

“Still, I don’t think there’s any need to be all, ‘ready, set, go!’ about it...”

The alarm had finished blaring. Meaning it was probably meant to signal the arrival of the carriages.

“It seems there’s some sort of arrangement where people aren’t allowed to come out to attract customers until the bell rings.”

“So that was why it was oddly deserted before...” Orphen said with his eyes narrowed and crossed his arms.

“Umm... are you customers?” A voice suddenly came from behind him and Orphen turned around.

He’d thought there was no one there anymore, but since the figure had been

leaning on a sign that said “Welcome to Ledgeborne Hot Spring Town!” he hadn’t noticed her.

It was a woman wearing a sweater and a black skirt. And, just like everyone else had been, she was carrying a banner.

She was looking at them with eyes that, even speaking optimistically, didn’t look friendly, though it might still have been her best attempt at a customer service smile. It didn’t look like she was evaluating their finances in the way that the other people had—not that she had sized them up favorably, mind you, just that she wasn’t sizing them up at all. Maybe she just wasn’t a very good judge of that.

“Y-Yeah...” Orphen decided to nod. He unfolded his arms and observed the woman approaching them.

She seemed to be about the same age as Orphen, but since she wasn’t wearing any makeup, she looked a lot younger. The weak way she walked forward made it seem like a stiff breeze could push her back or blow her off course. Plus, she looked like if she *was* blown off course, she’d just keep walking without noticing. Her banner declared, in a somewhat sloppy fashion, “The Branch of the Forest Lodge.”



Claiomh tugged on Orphen's sleeve from behind him and asked, "Wait, isn't that the place where we were supposed to be staying?"

"Yeah," Orphen told her over his shoulder, then turned back to the woman.

This time, it was clear that she was appraising them as she asked, "Umm... have you decided where you're staying, then?" It seemed she hadn't thought that highly of them after all.

Orphen shook his head, though he really wasn't sure what to tell her. "...No. I lost the bag that had all my money in it."

"Ah... So you don't have any money, then." She was clearly disappointed. Her shoulders drooped, and the hand holding the banner fell slack at her side as well.

There was silence for a few seconds, but eventually, the woman raised her head again. She looked like she'd gotten an idea, and maybe since she'd decided the three of them weren't customers, the tone of her voice abruptly changed.

"So, what are you gonna do?"

"Well... I guess we just came up here 'cause we thought whoever stole my bag might be here, too."

"If there was money in it, you're not getting it back. That's obvious, isn't it?"

"Yeah... I guess so..."

"Wanna stay at our place?"

"Huh?" Orphen exclaimed, not comprehending the question.

But the woman went on without paying him any mind. "You can stay with us if you want to. Though it's not like our place is all that great."

"Oh... Thanks." Orphen thanked her without thinking, but then he hurriedly corrected himself. "Wait a second. I really don't have any money. I can't even pay for food."

"Uh huh. Well, you can work for it, then. That sound good?"

The woman walked off into town, leaving a dumbfounded Orphen behind.

She couldn't have missed the fact that none of them were following her, but she didn't even look back at them. *Well, it's not like she really needs to check,* Orphen thought.

"What should we do, Orphen?" Claiomh looked up at him in confusion, like she hadn't been following their conversation at all.

Looking back at her, Orphen thought to himself for a moment. "Well, we can stay there for free, so... why not?" He figured it was a better option than searching blindly for his bag.

Majic, on the other hand, looked absolutely appalled. "But, we'll have to work...?"

Orphen nodded. "Yep. It'll be hard work, Majic, but I know you can do it."

Claiomh nodded as well. "Mhm. It'll be hard, Majic, but you can do it."

"Uuugh..."

And so, they managed to procure an inn with no particular trouble (if you didn't count Majic breaking down and crying, that is).

When they looked back at the woman, they found that she'd already walked pretty far away from them. She really wasn't going to wait for them at all.

But just then, she turned around, her bundle of braided hair leaping behind her. Her voice echoed in the wind. "Oh, I'm Eris. Remember it, okay?"

It had probably only been 15 minutes since they'd entered the town.

In that 15 minutes, the Ledgeborne Hot Spring Town had absorbed a great number of visitors. Unlike before, the winds that blew through the town now carried with them the clear presence of people.



After calmly considering his situation, there was something he was coming to realize.

Or rather, there was something he had sort of been coming to realize for a while now.

No, to be honest, he'd known this all along.

It was a self-evident truth, to put it bluntly.

...Why does all this stuff have to happen to me, too? Dorton asked the brown grasshopper on the large rock before his eyes. He knew it wasn't the sort of question a bug could answer, but when he thought it over, he realized there wasn't anyone else he could turn to.

Suddenly feeling deeply sad, Dorton closed his eyes. And though he wasn't sure if that was why, his sadness seemed to lessen some. Maybe it was just because he was getting used to it.

When he let his emotions fade, all he was left with was simple perception. Why was there a rock in front of his face? Normally, rocks were found at one's feet.

The answer was simple. The rock was in front of his face because he had plunged into the ground head-first. And the reason he was interacting with the ground in such a physics-defying way was, of course, because he had fallen face-first to the ground. From where, you might ask? Well, from a cliff high up above.

What a simple explanation... Dorton thought to himself, barely managing to deny the fact that he was starting to want to cry again.

He heard a voice then.

"Hmm." It had come from just in front of him—in other words, there was another person plunged into the ground in the exact same way he was on the other side of the rock.

The grasshopper was long gone, by the way. It must have run off, unable to answer his question.

In any case, the voice had, needless to say, come from his brother. He had his arms folded as he balanced rather skillfully on his head, groaning with his eyes closed.

"We were just one step away, but unfortunately, victory slipped from our grasp."

"It's kinda scary how the more I hear that, the more I lose any will to deny it

and just end up going along with it.”

“Mm. So you agree. It seems you’re starting to get a sense for this thing called war.”

His brother nodded his head, again displaying a strange skillfulness while he was still balanced on it, and opened his eyes wide. Plump eyes, like oranges, with a strangely sharp gaze.

“But this time, he made a big mistake!” Volkan tumbled down, then jumped up. On his feet, this time.

Dortin fell and raised his head at the same time. Blinking his eyes, he asked, “A mistake?”

“That’s right! In his haste, he committed a dire error! And this mistake will no doubt lead to him dying of embroidery! In a checkered pattern!” Dortin’s brother declared, clenching a fist in a pose like he was shouldering an earthquake.

Dortin wasn’t sure what he should do for a moment. Of course, he only had two options: foolishly ask “What do you mean?” or foolishly ignore him. Nevertheless, he wasn’t sure which to choose.

He arrived at a conclusion a moment later. That conclusion being, if both are foolish, then it doesn’t really make a difference either way.

“What do you mean?” he asked, and Volkan gave him a big nod.

“Well! This time, all we did was fall down from a branch, this time! We didn’t even do anything to him! Yet he attacked us for no reason!”

“Well, I guess so.”

“That means that justice is definitively on our side! Meaning he was in the wrong, and I wasn’t, and since he’s wrong, it means he loses. Since he was wrong. Isn’t that right? There’s some sort of amazing saying that expresses something like this, right?”

“Uhh...” Dortin couldn’t think of anything, but Volkan snapped his fingers all on his own, eyes sparkling.

“I remembered. It’s a victory by decision.”

“Is that... a saying?”

“Mhm. Well, we managed to have a nice feel-good victory, so I’ll store that as a memory right around here in my head for the rest of eternity. I’m sure the blue sky and the clouds and the sun and the birds will remember it, too.”

“I do feel like it’ll be pretty hard to forget this one.”

“Now then!” After rattling all that off, Volkan spun around on the spot.

A cliff towered before him—there’s no need to be coy about it. It was the very cliff they’d fallen from several minutes earlier—and Volkan pointed at it, raising his voice to an even higher volume.

“By the way, it’s become clear to me exactly what it is we must do next!”

“Huh?” Dortin asked.

His brother gave him a simple answer, still pointing up at the cliff. “We gotta climb our way up this thing.”

“...I guess so,” Dortin agreed with a sigh. It was misfortune after misfortune for him, with not even a moment between to dwell on his sadness.

Chapter III: Effort with No Payoff

The Branch of the Forest Lodge. Orphen wasn't sure what was "lodge"-like about a hot spring inn, but that's what the sign above the entrance proclaimed. The painted wooden sign looked old, but from the lack of dirt on it, it seemed to be well taken care of.

The building wasn't bad. It also looked old, but there were signs of minor renovations here and there.

"Well, here we are," Eris said with a carefree wave.

Claiomh had her mouth open. "Wow..." Leki had his mouth open for no reason as well. When she shut hers, he followed suit. He seemed to have picked up a habit of imitating Claiomh, though Orphen wasn't sure what he found fun about it.

In any case, now Claiomh was nodding, looking satisfied. "It seems pretty nice. I assumed we were gonna be taken to a super weird inn, based on the usual way things go."

"What usual way..." Orphen scratched his head and shrugged. "It does look pretty nice, though."

Of course... *It looks a little too nice given the price I reserved it for down at the base of the mountain. It might just be that the entrance looks nicer than the rest of it.*

"The entrance just looks nicer than the rest of it," Eris stated plainly.

"..."

"Why'd you suddenly go all limp, Master?" Majic asked.

Orphen sighed resignedly. "Just thinking about how I'm only right about things when I don't want to be."

The rest of the inn didn't look as bad as Eris had implied, but it was true that it didn't look all that impressive compared to the lavish four-and five-story inns

nearby. The Branch of the Forest was only two stories, which Orphen assumed meant the guest rooms were on the second floor and the first floor was for things like the dining hall, kitchen, and staff rooms. Not that he could see any of that from the outside, of course.

The largest window they could see from the entrance looked into a large hall. Two potted plants sat on either side of the hall, with no branches and large leaves. They didn't look like local plants. The sight of them was almost comical, but they also distracted from the somewhat out-of-place white walls in the hall.

As they headed inside, Eris suddenly spun around. "By the way, what did you three come here for?"

"Huh?" Orphen said dumbly, not understanding the meaning of her question.

"What did you come here for?" Eris repeated herself with a straight face.

"Well, uh... to soak in the springs, I guess?" was the answer Orphen managed to come up with.

Eris sighed deeply and Orphen frowned. She clearly seemed to be disappointed for some reason, but he didn't know why.

"I see. Well... that's too bad, I guess." She hung her head, looking truly regretful.

"Why?" Orphen asked.

She shrugged and opened the door, and when she turned around again, the disappointment was gone from her face.

"Anyway, it's fine if you use this door to go in and out, just try not to bother any of the guests, okay? We've got vacancies, but now that I think about it, you can't exactly stay in guest rooms, can you? You'll stay in the workers' quarters... is what I would like to say, but we don't have any, so you there, the girl, you can stay in my room. That's fine, right?"

"...And what about us?" Orphen asked, pointing at himself.

"You can put up a tent in the backyard," she said plainly. "I think there's at least one in storage that's not broken. Just go around from there and there's something like a yard. You'll figure it out."

“...Gotcha.” Orphen decided to nod.

“...I wonder what this is about.”

“What do you mean?”

There was indeed “something like a yard” behind the inn. Orphen wasn’t entirely sure what qualified something as a yard, but the fact that the building looked a little pathetic from back there meant that the yard was at least achieving some level of decency. Looking up at the building from the yard, the building looked so pathetic it was as if this were a clear weak point in its design.

The front walls of the building were cleaned perfectly, but the walls in the back didn’t look like they’d been touched in a long time. The white paint on the walls had grown discolored with damage and dirt, and the windows were so dusty that you couldn’t see inside through them. There were weeds everywhere, and sticking up out of them as if seeking help were the handles of a wheelbarrow.

Inside the abandoned yard, surrounded by a wooden fence with holes in it here and there, Orphen was looking around, wondering where exactly there was supposed to be space to put up a tent. He didn’t think they’d be able to without cutting the grass—and maybe that’s exactly what Eris wanted them to do.

Majic was watching him, leaning against the door of a (yet again) aged shed. That was probably where the tent was supposed to be, but at a glance, it didn’t seem like the door would open... it was hanging crooked. The hinges seemed to be messed up.

Majic frowned at Orphen’s question. “That girl. I mean, it’s nice that we can stay here, but putting up a tent out here isn’t all that different from camping out, right?”

“Yep, but complaining isn’t gonna make a difference.” Orphen kicked at the overgrown weeds. Not that that would do anything with the level of vegetation in the yard. “I’m more curious what the deal is with this whole town... something seems off about it.”

“Yeah... it does seem a little strange.”

“Though, maybe that’s just what happens when you advertise yourself as the only hot springs town on the continent.”

Orphen stopped moving as he complained; then he noticed something and his eyes opened wide. “What’s... that?” His eyes were fixed on something installed on the back of the building.

“A bath heater?” Majic answered him simply.

“A bath heater...” That was indeed what it was. A black, barrel-shaped bath heater made of metal. Next to its ugly shape was a stack of firewood. The firewood had a sheet over it so it wouldn’t get wet in the rain.

After thinking for a moment, Orphen cocked his head. “Do hot springs need bath heaters?”

“Maybe they have to be reheated?”

“Hmm...” Orphen approached the bath heater, not quite satisfied with that explanation. It wasn’t lit at the moment, but it had new soot on it like it was used every day. There was a half-burnt piece of firewood in it as well, and this too looked recent.

“More importantly, what should we do? I don’t think we’ll be able to get a tent up here.” Majic was looking around the yard looking troubled.

Orphen gave him a noncommittal nod. “We didn’t even hear where the tent was, either. I think the vibe of this town kinda got to me. I was a little out of it at the time. We could go ask her... I dunno if I like this Eris girl, though.”

A window nearby opened noisily, revealing Eris behind it. “The tent’s in there,” she said curtly, indicating the shed.

“...Thanks.”

“Along with the mower.”

“My gratitude grows by the moment.”

“Once you’ve got that done, come in through the front. I’ve got plenty of work for you.”

“If you’re waiting for me to grovel, you’re gonna have to give me something else.”

“...That’s all I can think of.” The window closed.

Orphen heaved a sigh.

“This doesn’t open.” Majic groaned after taking three good tugs on the shed’s slanted door.

Orphen realized his error when he saw that—it wasn’t just the door that was slanted. The shed itself was also slanted in the other direction.

He shut his eyes and shook his head, then groaned. “I’ve lived my life so diligently all this time... What is it that I’ve done to deserve this treatment?”

As he struggled with the unopening door with all his might, Majic remarked, “If you actually think that, then you’re really gonna get in trouble someday.”

“...You might be right.” Orphen opened his eyes, put his hand on his hip, and sighed. “If there’s such a thing as fate, then there might not be anything we can do to resist it, but it doesn’t hurt to be prepared. That’s what making an effort’s all about, really. At least, that’s what my sister says.”

After grumbling for a bit, Orphen headed for the shed. It was clear at this point that even if he helped Majic, it would be physically impossible to open the door, but if it came down to it, he could destroy the door, or destroy a wall, or destroy the whole thing from the ground up if he had to. Of course, the shed looked run-down enough that if he did one of those things, the other two were likely to naturally follow...

Just then...

“Who’re you two?”

Hearing the voice come from behind him, Orphen turned around. There was only one entrance to the backyard, and a woman was peering into it from there. She looked to be at an age just between middle-aged and old, and she was small, but appeared fit.

She looked at them like she was looking at a piece of bread with bugs coming out of it and commented, “You’re dressed awful oddly.”

“Y-You think so? I don’t really have any clothes that look better on me than this...” Orphen answered before realizing how pointless the exchange was.

He cleared his throat and corrected himself. “Uhh... what should I say here... We were told by someone from this inn that we could stay here.”

“From this inn?” The woman furrowed her brow in suspicion.

The same window as before then opened without any warning, Eris’s face popping out from it. “Ah, Mama. These people don’t have anywhere to stay, so I brought them here to do some work for us.”

“‘Mama’?” Orphen repeated without thinking.

Eris gave him a glance and shrugged her shoulders. “That’s right. She’s my mother, Sheena. Mama, these are...” A question mark seemed to form before her. “...What were your names again?”

“I’m Orphen. This is Majic. And the traitor who gets to sleep with a roof over her head is Claiomh.”

“Who’re you calling a traitor?!” The voice came from beyond the window. That must have been Eris’s room, and the two of them were in there.

Orphen looked between the woman and Eris. There was something similar about their faces and the general air around them, but they seemed to be very far apart in age.

“Hmm.” Sheena gave them an appraising look, going to no effort to hide it, before quickly allowing them to stay. “Well, it’s fine, I suppose. Seems they’ll be able to chop wood, at least.”

“Oh, that’s what I was forgetting, isn’t it?”

“...”

“There’s that trouble I was talking about,” Majic whispered to the silent Orphen.



From a biological standpoint, it could be said that dwarves were not particularly adept at climbing.

Dortin was considering such things deeply at the moment. Dwarven bodies were so heavy that they didn't float, and their joints weren't particularly flexible. Before the dragons came to the continent and brought their culture with them, the only weapon dwarves really had against their harsh environment was the sturdiness of their bodies. Not having the dexterity to obtain much food, they had adapted in a rather roundabout way to simply stay alive somehow while requiring less nutrition. At least, Dortin recalled reading something like that in a book once. He thought he recalled the author being human, though.

Truthfully, dwarves were probably remarkable as far as living creatures went, but right now, all Dortin could do with this information was sigh. His viability as an organism didn't do a thing for him when it came to ascending this cliff.

Dortin considered such things deeply as he looked down at his brother, who was upside down on the ground, his head embedded in the earth.

"You were close that time, Brother."

"Indeed!" Volkan leapt up and stood at an angle with his fist at his side (this seemed to be his signature pose lately), nodding vigorously. "Just further proof that there's nothing that the Bulldog of Masmaturia, the Great Vulcano Volkan, can't do! You must extol the virtues of this folk hero as he attempts to conquer nature itself!"

"I guess so. You should try for two meters this time."

"On your marks, get ready... go!"

Dortin ignored his brother as he leapt at the cliff once more, and looked around the area instead. They were indeed still in the mountains. Beneath the cliff was a forest. It wasn't so grand as to be called "untouched" or anything, but the area was overgrown with trees and other vegetation. The plentiful branches blocking out the sight of the blue sky and casting dark shadows on the ground almost looked like a single unending mass of green.

It's an incredible forest... Masmaturia's eternally frost-covered trees are prettier, though. Dortin couldn't help but stare at the forest, his back to the cliff. The trees were so tall that he couldn't see the tops of them from down here, and they were packed so closely together that there was hardly room to move

through them. It was a beautiful forest. He recalled someone saying that the Kiesalhiman continent was beautiful, though he couldn't remember who it was.

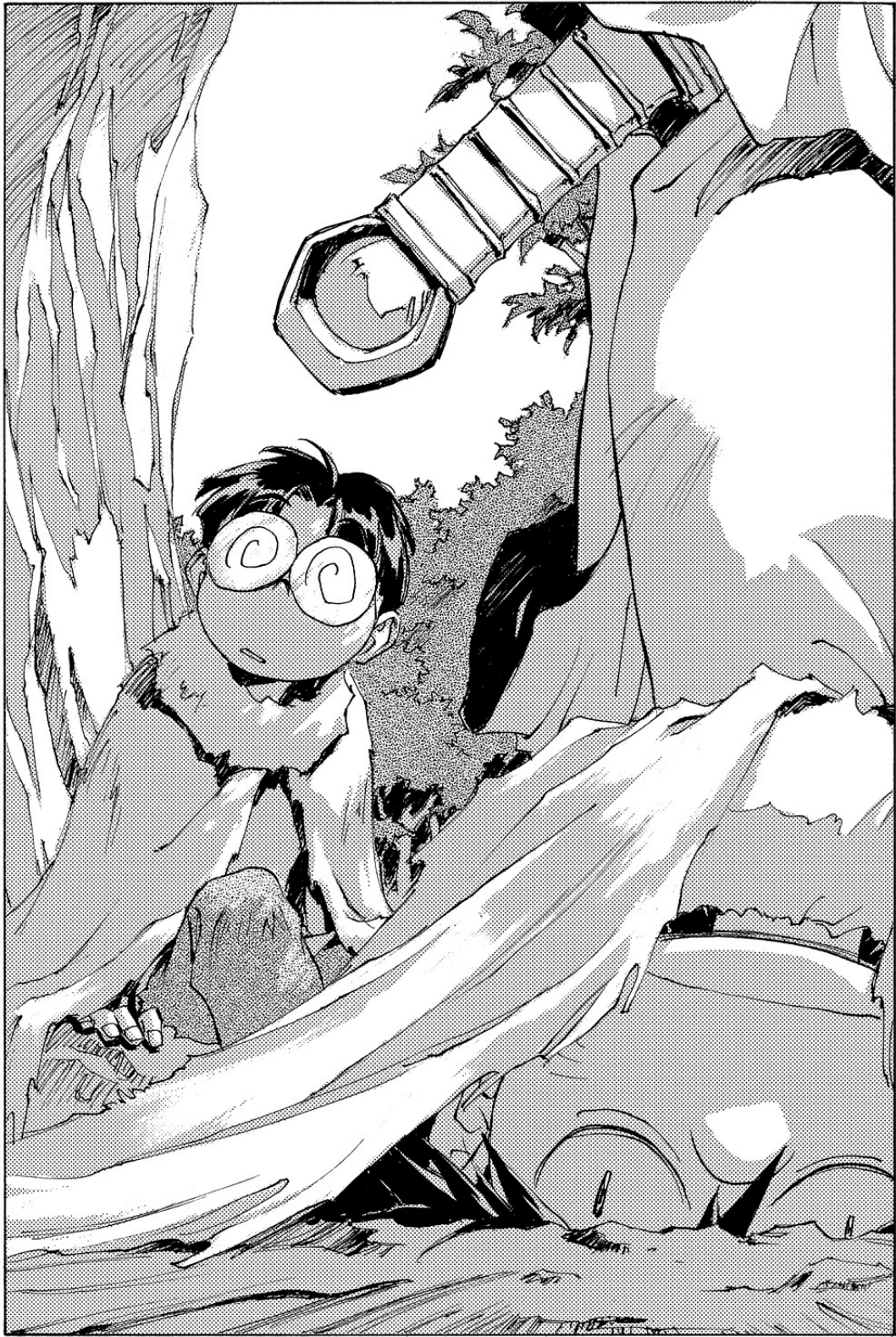
No one would try to defile this beauty. No one at all. They wouldn't try to take control of anything. It just existed. That was the Kiesalhiman continent.

Of course, not being controlled meant not being managed.

Narrowing his eyes against the darkness of the deep forest—darkness he couldn't possibly see through—Dortin shuddered. The baton was passed in his mind, straight from his poetic musings to more realistic concerns. In other words, things like, "Are there any carnivores in this area?" A realistic concern indeed.

He looked around the cliff this time. It seemed to go on forever. If they couldn't climb to the top of this sheer cliff, they would have to walk along the bottom of it in search of a path in order to escape from here.

That being the case, the stillness of the forest and the rustling of the leaves on the trees were nothing more than a dark shadow cast in his heart.



He turned to his brother. “H-Hey, Brother...”

“What is it?” Upside down, his head buried in the ground again, his brother crossed his arms and responded in a surprisingly magnanimous tone.

Dortin had no time to wonder about his mysterious mood, however. He waved his arms about, flustered. “I was thinking, since this cliff is probably impossible to climb, maybe we should try to find another way back... Uhh, you know, since the sun’s setting and all.” *Carnivores tend to be nocturnal*, he added to himself.

“Mm!” Volkan said, leaping up energetically once more and nodding. “Well, for your brother, this cliff would be a simple feat to climb with my secret technique, the Vertical Wall Walk, but I’d forgotten that such a feat would likely be difficult for you. Heroes tend to forget how useless you regular folks are, you know. There’s nothing for it. Though your brother *could* climb this cliff, let’s make sure we’re clear on that.”

Keeping the thought that Volkan was probably just waiting for Dortin to bring it up himself deep inside his heart, he replied vaguely. “Yeah. I guess you’re right. Sure, that’s fine, but... what should we do? I wonder which way the path is.”

“There’s no map?”

“Well, it’s a hiking course, and I doubt there are too many people who fall off this cliff, so I don’t think there’ll be a map, no.”

“Mmm. Looks like all we managed to do was confirm just how useless you are,” Volkan muttered to himself. Then he quickly (it didn’t look like he put much thought into it) turned to the right, which was the upward direction of the hiking course. “That way, I’d say.”

“Why’s that?”

“Just a feeling.”

“...Well, I guess I’d be pretty suspicious if you had a clear reason at a time like this, too.”

In actuality, neither right nor left looked particularly different from one

another. If there was no difference between them, then it didn't matter which way they went, and... he was worried either way.

In which case, there was no point in worrying about it.

Though, normally I think you'd worry a little... Adding that thought onto the end, Dortin headed in the direction they'd decided on.

The sun was still high in the sky, but he had no idea how long that would last. They should probably hurry, he determined.

"Well, let's go. Even if we don't find a path, we might find a place where we can climb back up, at least."

"I don't think there's any need to hurry."

"What if there are wild dogs out here or something?"

"C'mon Dortin, let's go! What're you waiting for?!"

That's when it happened.

Rustle. There was a sound from behind them, and Dortin froze. He became aware of an unpleasant taste rising in his throat.

Volkan was also frozen, in his "setting off" pose. He must have heard it, too.

"Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-What's wrong, Dortin? You stopped," his brother asked him. He had also stopped, with a cold sweat dripping down his brow, but apparently, he didn't want to admit that.

Wild dogs. The words he'd said himself were echoing inside his own ears now. Still frozen, Dortin replied, "I-It's nothing really," but he didn't turn around.

"Right. Of course it is. It's nothing over here, too."

"Y-Yeah."

"..."

"..."

Even time seemed to stop for a while. And when it finally began to move again, it was Volkan who spoke.

"Incidentally, this is just small talk, but when there's more than one fleeing

prey in front of them, wild dogs will go after the slower of the bunch, right?”

Dortin didn't miss the fact that Volkan was inching forward as he spoke. Creeping forward as well, he replied, “Yeah. And this is just small talk, but there's probably more than one dog, so I think all the prey would get captured anyway.”

Volkan seemed visibly disappointed when he heard that... though he still continued to inch forward, of course. “I see... Anyway, continuing the small talk, if one held his ground and fought to the death, then the other one might be able to escape, don't you think?”

“Just small talk, but I think that would only decide who died first, and you'd get the same result in the end anyways.”

“...”

“...”

“Dortin.”

“Yes?”

“What about one person blowing themselves up and taking the dogs with them?”

“.....”

There was a long, long silence, after which Dortin took a fearful glance over his shoulder. He shuddered just from imagining what sight would await him.

A long line of red eyes.

A growl foretelling death.

Foreclaws digging up the dirt.

By the time he realized it, he wouldn't be able to see anything. In one strike, they'd bite through his neck, and when he breathed in, the air would just pass through the back of his throat. His lungs alone would wail in protest as he writhed around on the ground, an eruption of adrenaline burning through his body.

That was the sort of thing he imagined when he turned around, but...

“Huh...?” Dorton blinked. There was nothing there.

The forest, the dirt, the cliff, the wind... they were all quiet. There was a gentle breeze flowing through the trees, and not even an insect in sight.

Finally relaxing, Dorton let all the tension out of his shoulders. “Was it just my imagination?”

Kshaaa! A dark shadow suddenly leapt out from a nearby bush with a shrill cry. The lump of black fur flew at them like it was running through the air.

“Waaaaaaah!” The two turned around and ran, their screams alone echoing through the air where their soulless afterimages still remained.



“The most famous legend of the area is likely the ‘trial by underground heat.’

“Of course, we are only able to observe the location of this execution by magma because the lava has cooled into rock, but it is still easy to see how incredible it would have looked back then.

“What did these ancient people judge and punish here? Some visitors claim to be able to hear voices from the past in this area. It’s terrifying to think that they had to borrow the power of magma in order to execute these ancient immortals.

“Including this place of execution, several other ancient ruins have been found near here. Aside from ruins already out of the reach of exploration teams, it might be nice to take a sort of intellectual tour of the area. Some locations require entry fees, so please inquire with the people at your inn for more details. They might even be able to tell you about little-known places that could surprise you.

“Of course, if you’re looking for leisure, you’ve come to the right place. Get active for a reasonable fee in the best sports club tourists can enjoy, the Lotz Sports Festival. The sport of the area is stickball, and you’ll find all our courts are 100% natural turf. Our ample gyms and indoor facilities mean you can swim in a pool, play table tennis, or compete in all kinds of ball games whenever you’d like.

“After you’ve seen the sights and worked up a good sweat, we invite you to

relax in our famous Ledgeborne hot springs. You'll find plenty of hot spring inns, all with high-quality baths that can be enjoyed at low prices.

"For help planning a trip, stop by the Green Ride travel agency, with the familiar green sign."

"Well, that's what it says." Claiomh slapped the pamphlet closed and pursed her lips, staring down at it. Frowning, she raised her eyebrows and exclaimed, "But isn't it kinda different?!"

Orphen didn't think her complaints were all that unreasonable. In fact, he basically felt the same way. However...

"Whatever, just hand me that dish already," he said, thrusting his hand out at the frowning girl with the dish in her hands.

Wiping her hands on an apron with a floral pattern, Claiomh snatched the large plate Majic was holding out for her and handed it off to Orphen, sticking her tongue out at him. Orphen took it and placed it in a cupboard.

The sink area in the kitchen was large enough for the three of them to stand there lined up and still have plenty of room. Majic was washing the dishes, and when he was done, Orphen was putting them away. Claiomh had nothing to do, so she ended up just standing between them, passing the dishes from one to the other. Luckily, there weren't too many dishes to wash, since there weren't that many customers, Orphen guessed.

Incidentally, in a surprising show of good sense, Claiomh had remarked that animals shouldn't be allowed in the kitchen, so Leki was waiting for them just outside the door. He might have been bored, because he was rolling around and looking every which way. Maybe he just enjoyed seeing the scenery change every time he rolled.

"Feels pretty unproductive to work for no pay, doesn't it..." Majic was holding two small dishes in one hand, washing them dexterously as if he'd done it countless times before.

Orphen glanced at both of them in turn and frowned. "Sure, but what the hell else are we supposed to do? We've got no money. You wanna camp out on the

street after coming all the way here?”

“No way!” Claiomh’s answer came quickly.

“Right? This is our only option.” He thrust out his finger at her, but she still didn’t seem satisfied.



Pulling over a chair she'd brought from the dining hall of her own volition, she plopped down into it and groaned, brow still furrowed. "Isn't this all your fault for losing the bag that had your money in it, Orphen?"

Orphen didn't let that slide. "You're gonna make that my fault?"

"What's that supposed to mean? You tossed your bag and ran off."

"Yeah, and if you had just picked it up, everything would have been fine, wouldn't it?"

"But why me?"

"Umm... More importantly..." Majic cut in as he dried the dishes he'd finished washing. "Who took the bag in the first place? If we could just find them, then we wouldn't have to be working like this."

"Good point..." Orphen granted, retracting the finger he'd pointed at Claiomh. He looked up at the ceiling and sighed. "That path was supposed to be a hiking course, but it's basically just a road that connects this place to Nashwater at the foot of the mountain. So the only people on it would be coming here or leaving here."

"But most people take carriages, right?"

"Yep. So it'd be somebody too stingy to take a carriage... not that we can really talk, I guess."

"But then, even if we only suspect the people who just came here—since it wouldn't do any good to suspect the people who left—that still narrows down the list quite a bit, doesn't it?"

"Yeah. There probably aren't too many people who make the trip on foot, either."

Agreeing with both of them in turn, Orphen clapped his hands together. "Well, having a plan of action's pretty motivating, isn't it? Anybody going around stealing stuff doesn't have much right to live anyway, so no one'll complain if I'm a teensy bit rough with 'em, right?"

"...Can I just ask what exactly 'rough' means coming from you, Master?" Majic asked with narrowed eyes.

“Oh, wiping their memories so they have to redo the last ten years or so of their life,” Orphen replied breezily.

“Yikes.”

“Well, jokes aside, I really gotta find that bag, don’t I? I’d like my money back, of course, but there’s important stuff to me in there, too.” Orphen nodded to himself firmly. He was talking to himself, but it was loud enough for Claiomh to hear it.

She leapt to her feet and swiftly removed her apron. “That’s right. We’ve gotta find it quick.”

“True. Well, keep at it, Majic.”

“...Huh?” Majic finally caught on then, holding a dish in one hand. He paled and asked, unbelieving, “K-Keep at it? Where are you going, Master?”

“Out.” Orphen headed for the door, leaving him with that one-word answer. He left the kitchen, striding over Leki, who was looking up at him.

“I’m coming, too!” Claiomh pattered after him, scooping up Leki.

They could hear Majic’s flustered voice behind them. “Hey, wait!”

But when the door closed behind them, it cut him off.

The Branch of the Forest Lodge. Orphen recalled saying himself that it seemed somewhat contradictory. It looked more like someone’s home than an inn, and there were signs that it was well taken care of in places, but it didn’t look like much money was being spent on it.

Looking up at a picture of a flower on the wall with Leki in her arms, Claiomh muttered, “We did something kinda nasty to Majic just now, didn’t we?”

“The past tense doesn’t make you sound very sincere, you know,” Orphen told her, giving her a little tap on the head.

They were in the dining hall, but it almost seemed smaller than the kitchen. The dining hall was connected to the hall that led to the entrance. That was the general layout of the place.

Heading toward the hall, he told her, “Besides, it’s not like the dish-washing is gonna go any faster if I help. Letting people handle what they’re good at is just being efficient.”

“Sounds like an excuse to me.”

In the middle of the hall, there was a pretty realistic three-dimensional map. It was a model of the whole area, not just of the town. The town was in the middle, and around it, they spotted a familiar hiking course and a cliff they recognized, too. It looked like it had been there a while, but didn’t seem particularly valuable.

“Huh?” Claiomh suddenly said, and Orphen stopped. She was looking down at the map with her eyes wide.

“What?” Orphen asked, starting to walk off again. “Weren’t you gawking at that map enough earlier?”

“Yeah, but I just noticed this. See, right here?”

He followed the line her finger was pointing at and looked down at the map. “Hmm?” Walking back over to her, he leaned down and studied the map carefully. He sent a glance at Claiomh to ask her what she meant.

Putting Leki on her head, Claiomh told him, “Look—here. Isn’t this weird?”

Orphen frowned, unsure of what she was trying to say.

Drawing it out for some reason, she pointed to a spot on the map and raised her voice. “Look! Here! The path we were on earlier. Here’s the cliff, and there’s a forest below it, but when we saw it before—”

“L-Look out!”

Tumble tumble tumble crash!

“Aaaaaaaaaah!”

Some sounds and a scream cut off Claiomh’s poor explanation.

“What was that?” Orphen guessed the direction the scream had come from and turned toward the entrance. He quickly realized that the scream had been a woman’s—Eris’s. Poking his head out into the entrance area, he found Eris

sitting there like she'd just fallen to the floor.

Meanwhile, in front of the stairs on the opposite side of the hall from the entrance, there was a man lying tangled up in a huge backpack, looking like he'd just taken a great tumble down the stairs.

Back at the entrance, there was a man watching all this who was, to put it nicely, well-built (and to put it less nicely, fat). He opened his mouth to say, "Sorry about that, Miss. I'm sure Researcher Nosapp didn't mean to scare you. It seems he was merely lacking in a fundamental understanding of just how helpless and undefended the human physique is to the natural powers of gravity."

Eris didn't respond. Or rather, it seemed she was unable to respond as she sat there frozen, eyes wide.

Before her, the man with the backpack sluggishly righted himself and stood up. He still seemed young, but there was a quality about him like he was aged beyond his years. To put it simply, he seemed worn out. Though he looked like he must have been older than Orphen at least.

The man—"Researcher Nosapp," apparently—somehow managed to pick up the backpack that clearly looked like it weighed more than he did and mumbled, "I... I guess you're right... Chief Researcher Conrad." His eyes were spinning.

The fat man—he must have been Conrad—smiled, satisfied, and said, "Mm. Why don't you help the young lady up, Researcher Nosapp. That's right. Oh, what a fool you are. Do you think you're shaking hands with a member of the parliament? Nowadays, escorting a woman with your right hand is—well, never mind that. More importantly, time is money, you know? Do hurry. Ah, and Miss, we'll be leaving to do some research, but we plan to be back in time for dinner... Oh, are you listening?"

"Huh?!" Rising with help from Nosapp, Eris was standing there with her mouth open, but she finally made a sound, like she was a machine that had just been turned on. "O-Oh... Yes. Alright."

"Mm. We'll see you then. Researcher Nosapp, pull it together, will you? I've been considering it as a secondary research topic for a while now, but I wonder

what it is that causes your sluggishness. Why were you not out of the building before me?”

“...It’s because he’s in the way, so he can’t get out, right?” Claiomh whispered to Orphen.

Orphen nodded and watched Nosapp and his backpack—or maybe the backpack and the pair of legs sprouting out of it—follow after Conrad. The door closed behind them, leaving Eris standing absentmindedly on her own.

Orphen entered the hall and pointed at the closed door. “Who were they?”

“Customers. The only guests our inn is currently housing.” It seemed like there was still surprise in Eris’s voice. Either that or it was just her usual listlessness causing her to sound absentminded.

Brushing aside some of her bangs to regain her focus, she finally turned toward Orphen. “So, what is it?”

“Err, well...” Orphen smiled as he tried to come up with something to say. “Well, I was thinking. It’s a little inefficient to have three people doing dishes, so I thought we’d split up and us two would go outside—”

“Mm, good point.” Eris clapped her hands together. “It’d be better to chop the firewood while it’s still light outside. It’ll help if you guys split up and take care of it all at the same time.”

“No, I...”

“Then there’s the tent. I just checked and the wind blew it down. You’ll have to put it back up, since it might rain tonight.”

Orphen sensed movement behind him, so he turned around wordlessly. He found Claiomh swiftly making her way back through the hall.

She grinned and waved at him. “Well, I’ll get back to washing the dishes, Orphen. Have fun♥”

“...”

“Have fun.” There was no grinning from Eris.

“...Right.” He could think of nothing else to say, so Orphen just nodded,

cursing the unfairness of it all.

Chapter IV: A Night with No Quiet

The elder Fien Lotz was in a rotten mood.

The man was well aware of it. Even his partner probably was.

He snuck a glance to his side to find his companion standing there, shifting his weight from one foot to the other as if looking for an outlet for his oversized body. His eyes moved restlessly, seeking a place on which to settle his gaze.

Yes. He was well aware of it. But what did that matter? He questioned himself. Even if he knew, there was no way for his partner to produce a resolution to the situation. He was just waiting for the elder Fien's words.

He was just an old man with a cigar in his mouth. That was the only way to describe him. There was nothing else to him. Except, of course, that he was also the head of the Lotz Group, which owned most of the hot spring inns in the Ledgeborne Hot Spring Town.

The interior design of the president's office was a complete match for the elder Fien's tastes. Glossy, amber-colored furniture was arranged neatly and precisely inside. The only thing that didn't fit the ambience was a three-dimensional map of the hot spring village installed in the center of the room.

The map was a model of the surrounding area, and it probably qualified as well-made, but it was just out of place in the room. The man had no idea what it was doing here. It would have made much more sense from a design standpoint to put it in the entrance hall of an inn.

The old man finally removed the cigar from his mouth, blowing out smoke with his words. "So, you just came back empty-handed, is that right?"

"Well, yes," the man admitted with an awkward smile, even as he knew he shouldn't. Sure enough, the old man's mood worsened, but what else was he supposed to do?

"Ronan. Why do you think I keep you around? To attract customers? Well, that might be the case..."

The man—Ronan—opened his mouth to say something, then closed it. The elder Fien had raised his hand. It was the sign not to talk. He should obey, then. However...

“Am I really asking the impossible here? I wonder. Maybe I am. Ah. I suppose it was just too much to ask of you?”

“If I may, sir...” Ronan reluctantly spoke. “I think you would get the same result with anyone else, Mr. President.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Just what I said. The same thing would have happened if you’d sent anyone else. If you go every day and just tell them, ‘join the group’... If they’ve said no once, they’ll just continue to say no. They have no intention of joining. So shouldn’t we just give up on them?”

“That’s not the problem here!”

WHAM! The elder Fien hit his desk so hard, it leapt up. The old man stood up at the same time, shouting so loudly that the blood vessels in his neck were bulging.

“You will make her agree, no matter what you have to do!”

“Y-Yes, sir! Of course, sir!”

It wasn’t Ronan who had answered him. Ronan just closed his eyes and turned his head toward the ceiling.

Intimidated by the elder Fien, his partner stammered fearfully, “W-We’ll show those bitches what happens when they say no to you—”

That only made the elder Fien’s expression darken further, however. “You idiot! Just try it! I’ll kill you!” he bellowed, voice even louder than it had been before.

Ronan and his partner both froze.

A long stretch of time passed after that. It seemed like minutes. The heaving breaths of the elder Fien were the only marker of time passing.

The next time the elder Fien opened his mouth, the harsh tone was gone,

though his voice was still sharp. Quiet and sharp. “Just keep doing what you’ve been doing. Got it? If you got it, then get out of here.”

“...Yes, Boss.” Ronan nodded, bowed, and turned on his heel. He strode out of the president’s office, internally cursing his partner.

The two of them left the room and the thick door closed behind them as if to protect their rears.

“...Cripes.”

“Those rumors the last guy retired ’cause of stomach pain might be true, huh?”

They both muttered at the same time.

As his partner massaged his stomach, Ronan nodded quietly in agreement.



“Cripes...”

“Once again, you’ve brought trouble on yourself.”

“I’m gonna die...”

“You won’t die just from some sore muscles.”

“I *want* to die...”

“You sound like my dad when he’s got a hangover.”

“I’m... gonna... kill... you...” Orphen groaned, slowly rising. “Is that all you have to say to someone who’s in so much pain they can’t even stand?!” he screamed and turned around, but... Majic’s face was perfectly calm.

The boy was sitting in a chair, looking down at him with narrowed eyes. “I hardly think you have room to talk when you pushed all the dishes onto me and ran off, Master.”

Orphen averted his eyes. “Let’s set that aside for now.”

“What do you mean, ‘set it aside’?”

“Sure is autumn, huh? Guess it must be autumn back home, too...”

“Obviously.”

“♪Oh~, back home~”

“You can’t sing a song to get out of this one.”

“Tch.” Orphen clucked his tongue and gave up on the song.

The two of them were in the hall near the entrance. Orphen lay on his stomach on a not very big couch, looking up at Majic who was sitting in a chair. It wasn’t a very comfortable position, but there wasn’t anything he could do about that, as he couldn’t move.

Orphen closed his eyes. There was no point in yelling. He couldn’t get out of it by singing. So all there was left to do was scold him.

He opened his mouth and told his pupil slowly, “You know... talk about trouble all you want, but chopping 30 pieces of firewood is not easy work. My back is shot, and I couldn’t even fix the tent. We still gotta sleep outside, you know? You better be ready for that.”

“I had plenty to do after washing the dishes too, you know. I had to clean the bathrooms and then organize the attic. It was a lot of work.”

“What about the tomboy?”

“Claiomh had to make the beds and go shopping. But she likes that stuff, so I think she had fun with it.”

“Dammit. Why do I feel like I drew the short stick here?” Orphen groaned and moved to try to get up, but his back pain forced him to give up. His movement had been severely limited by muscle pain for the couple of hours it’d been since he’d chopped wood. *Maybe this is what it feels like to be stuffed and mounted while still alive*, he thought, which made him feel even worse, so he sighed.

He looked out the window. The sun had set. In fact, night had come. However...

“We can’t have dinner until those old guys—guests, whatever—come back, right? Cripes... Seriously...” Orphen’s mood only worsened as his stomach twinged with hunger.

“Yeah, I’m hungry, too...” Majic muttered, also looking rather pathetic.

“True, if they’re this late, maybe we should just eat first,” Eris said as she

walked into the hall.

Orphen rolled over so he could look up at her.

She strode in wearing the same apron she'd had on earlier that day, took a look at the three-dimensional map in the center of the hall, and then turned toward Orphen and Majic. "They should've said when they left that they were gonna be late. Honestly. Since they knew I'd be making them dinner, don't you think they should have figured that out?"

She frowned, obviously displeased. "Honestly, we never get any decent customers around here..."

"At least you *get* customers..." Majic muttered.

Orphen nodded his head in agreement. "Mhm. If you wanna see an inn with no customers, this kid's house is really somethin' else."

"...It's because of *you*, you know. Should you really be bragging about it?" Majic's gaze was icy, but Orphen ignored it.

Eris smiled, but it was the sort of smile where it was hard to tell whether she was genuinely amused or if she was just trying to be polite. Then she said, "It's real boring work. I really don't get why we have to keep doing it."

After a moment, she changed the subject completely. "Anyway, why don't you two take a bath? I'll make dinner in the meantime."

"A bath!" Orphen snapped his fingers victoriously. He forced himself up—his back groaned again, but he ignored it this time. "That's right. You're right! I'd forgotten what we came here for. And if I get in a hot spring, it'll probably soothe these aching muscles of mine."

"Yeah. We worked up a sweat, too."

"Oh, but that girl—Claiomh—is in there right now, so you should probably wait for her to—" But before she could finish...

"WHYYYYYYYYYYY?!" A strange scream resounded through the inn.

It quickly became apparent that the scream had come from Claiomh.

And Orphen's next thought after realizing that was, *Is it okay to run and check on her or not?*

Majic might have been thinking the same thing.

They exchanged a glance like it was something they'd prepared beforehand and Orphen groaned once again. ...*A scream?* He just couldn't come up with a reason she'd be screaming.

"Eris..." he started, intending to ask her, but the rest of his question vanished in his throat.

Eris was in the process of heading swiftly for the dining hall, a completely neutral expression on her face. All she left them with was her rapidly fading footsteps.

"It's strange," Majic murmured with a frightened look on his face. "Claiomh screaming and the whole area not being blown to smithereens, I mean."

"Now that you mention it, we really live in one hell of an environment usually, don't we?"

"Orphen, Orphen! Majic! Get over here! It's terrible!" Claiomh's high-pitched screams continued.

It seemed they would have to go after all.

"...Cripes." Orphen groaned for some time, then slowly stood. Taking his time, so that he didn't put too much of a strain on his back. Still, he couldn't quite stand all the way up.

Bent over, he took one step... his heel and toes hitting the floor at the same time. Orphen headed off like that, Majic following behind him.

Without turning back to look at him, he said, "Hypothesis #1: Somebody peeped on her."

"...Just so you know, Master, you look like some kind of strange creature right now."

"Leave me alone. Hypothesis #2: There's a corpse in the bath for some inexplicable reason."

“Can you not heal sore muscles with sorcery?”

“I imagine you probably could, but that wouldn’t make the pain go away. There’s no point. And Hypothesis #3: The bath is for some reason consommé soup. In the changing room, there are buckets of salt and pepper and a sign that asks guests to rub themselves with them before entering.”

The bath was in the very deepest part of the inn. That made sense, of course, since it had to be connected to the bath heater in the backyard.

The two trudged down the hall, turned a corner, and trudged on.



Eventually, they found a sign that said, “↑Changing Room,” so they headed that way.

The door was open, Claiomh standing imposingly in the doorway. “You’re late, you two!” That was what she said as soon as she saw them, in her usual pose with her hand on her hip and Leki on her head.

“Okay, but I think it’s pretty easy to see the state I’m in if you just look at me.”
Trudge trudge.

Orphen walked toward her in a way that made it impossible for him to increase his speed.

When Claiomh saw how he was moving, she said dumbfounded, as if she’d completely forgotten her anger, “...You look really uncool, Orphen.”

“I know.” Orphen nodded, being careful not to move his body too much up or down. Trudging up to where she stood in the doorway, he stopped there and lowered his right arm, which was held out before him. He then lowered his left arm, and then slowly, slowly, began to straighten out his knees and back.

Taking several long seconds to do so, Orphen finally arrived in a normal standing position. He wiped the sweat from his forehead and muttered, “Okay...” sounding deeply satisfied.

“That almost seemed like some sort of transformation,” Majic commented behind him.

Ignoring him, Orphen asked Claiomh, “So? What happened?”

“Oh, that’s right. Just listen to this! It’s terrible! C’mere!”

“Huh? We gotta move again? Uhh, gimme a minute, then. First I gotta... bend my back...”

“Ugh, geez! Enough with all that, just come here already!” Before Orphen could get back into the position he’d been walking in before, Claiomh grabbed his arm with a frustrated exclamation.

Feeling something cold run down his back, Orphen yelled, “Ah! Wait a second, Claiomh!”

“What is taking you so long?!”

“Gyaooooooooooooo?!” Orphen screamed as Claiomh mercilessly yanked his arm to pull him into the changing room. It was like his hips, his knees, and everything attached to his spinal cord was groaning with sheer malice. The pain made him bend back, and then forward with the recoil. As they walked through the changing room, Claiomh pulling Orphen along, he frantically tried to gather up the sense that was flying out of him. And when he’d finally managed to scrape some together, he put it into words and let it out. “Will you stop it?!”

He yanked his arm out of Claiomh’s hand, tears in his eyes. Jabbing his finger between her eyes when she turned around, he shouted, “What is your problem?! I don’t know what happened, but I felt like I was about to die for a second there! If you just have some new stupid shit to... say...”

His yelling gradually grew quieter. As his voice faded out into a whisper, it almost seemed like an echo from somewhere far-off to him. When he finally went silent, Orphen was just standing there with his eyes wide open.

Claiomh looked at him, silently asking him, “You get it now, right?” She might have asked him audibly as well, but he wasn’t listening.

A single line in a world of grey. A placid consciousness merely following that line. That was the sort of image Orphen had in his head.

Humans aren’t able to conceive of things they’ve never seen before. The best they could do was create an image, even if it was nonsensical, of the thing they were trying to conceptualize. Until they saw the real thing, that image was “real” to them, and no matter what anyone said, they would have a hard time overturning that person’s preconceptions. Probably.

Basically, people were prone to easily believing their own selfish imaginations.

A hot spring. This was something Orphen had never seen before, so he had created a vague image of it in his head. A tub made of natural rocks stacked up to about a person’s height. A beautiful starry sky, as if frozen in time, seen from a skylight. Vision clouded by steam, hearing dulled by submersion. Slightly viscous water that, when you stretched your legs out into it, caused a heat to seep deep into your body’s core.

Orphen closed his eyes, then opened them.

There were all sorts of things in the changing room: stacked up baskets, a mirror, pails, razors, a whetstone. But Orphen paid no mind to them. What Orphen was concerned with was the place that was connected to the changing room—the bath.

He could see blackened veneer walls and no floor—just the ground. On the ground was a metal basin about a meter high, filled to the brim with green water. Above the basin, there was a faucet on the veneer wall, likely connected to the bath heater outside. The bathwater came from there.

In other words... He came to an understanding, his mood darkening with the realization.

But the one who put that realization into words was the boy peeking into the room from behind him. “...It’s just a normal bath.”

“Wh...” Orphen bent his back and held his head in his hands, ignoring the searing pain that ran through him with the movement. “What the heeeell?!”



There was no way walking through a forest at night could be comfortable.

Nosapp merely trudged forward with his voiceless complaints. He didn’t even know where the body and head attached to his feet were headed, so he had no choice but to grumble. *Of course walking in the forest isn’t going to be pleasant.*

It wasn’t that he was frightened. The problem was just that he was being forced to trudge through thick underbrush with this huge pack on his back. Needless to say, he had no idea what was going on at his feet in the darkness, so if he tripped, he would just be thrown into the darkness with no clue where the ground even was.

“You seem a little unsteady on your feet, Researcher Nosapp.”

He heard Conrad addressing him from up ahead, where the chief researcher was walking with a portable gas lamp.

“Oh, honestly. You’re not going to tell me you’re tired already, are you? It’s a little shameful for a young person like yourself to be giving up already, don’t

you think? Oh, not that way. What is the problem, I wonder. Is there something wrong with your feet?”

I can walk just fine, he muttered to himself gloomily. *Or I could if your lamp was lighting up where I was going.*

But Conrad was some ten meters ahead of him, and Nosapp, because of the heavy pack he was carrying, just couldn't close the distance between them. The farther ahead Conrad got, the farther away the light he was carrying was, so it was basically your standard vicious cycle.

For the time being, Nosapp decided to push down his emotions as far as he could and open his mouth. He hoped it looked like he was smiling, but he figured it was too dark to tell anyway, so it probably didn't matter. “Say, Chief Researcher Conrad?”

“Yes?”

“I have a proposal.”

“Oho.”

“It's gotten pretty dark, so maybe we should head back for now and try again tomorrow.”

“I don't agree. Come on, let's carry on.”

“...”

Well, he wasn't expecting much in the first place. That's what he told himself, anyway, as he continued blindly along.

He'd thought that the sounds of the forest and the sounds of the night would just mix together to form sounds of the forest at night, but while he trudged along, they all started to sound like different things.

Footsteps. The whistling wind above them. The rustling of the leaves. When he stepped on the undergrowth and moisture spilled out from the plant life, it sounded almost like screams.

Whether it was night, or the forest, or either of them, the sounds were the same—it was the listener who was changed. Whether they listened to them at night or in the forest, it was the listener's mind that was constantly changing.

You want to know how I'm feeling? That's easy. I'm annoyed. Nosapp shook his head, conversing with an imaginary partner. To his real partner, he said, "But, Chief Researcher Conrad..."

"Yes?"

"This is just a theory of mine, but..."

"Oho."

"Isn't it dangerous to walk around at night in a place like this?"

"I feel the same way. Which is why we should hurry."

"..."

Some fates simply cannot be resisted.

Fate. What a wonderful word. Just shake your head with a smug look and you can get away with anything. Sometimes, you can cry, too. A truly incredible word.

Not that it does you any good.

All he could do was sigh.

And just then...

Rustle rustle rustle!

Nosapp stopped and looked around. The darkness was all too close. It wasn't as if he could see anything in the shadows the trees were casting.

He looked forward and even Conrad had stopped. He was looking left and right as if to shake his plump belly about. "Hmm... What was that just now?"

"How am I supposed to know?" Nosapp said. For now, he decided to set his pack on the ground. If it was some sort of dangerous animal, he wouldn't be able to flee carrying his things.

He heard grass rustling and twigs being stepped on. It went on long enough for him to squirm—he didn't feel confident trying to quantify the time due to the fear he was feeling—and it sounded like the noises were getting closer.

Footsteps. Noisy footsteps. And screams...

Screams? Nosapp asked himself. What he heard in the night, in the forest, in the forest at night, was voices.

“Dwaaaaaaaaaah!”

He wasn't the one that had screamed.

Two shadows had suddenly leapt out of the darkness of the forest. At first, he thought they were children. Since he was some distance away from Conrad, who had the light, it was almost complete darkness around him.

Two humanoid shapes emerged from that darkness. They were short, but stout, likely because of the bulky fur cloaks they were wearing. They were shouting and screaming, running straight forward regardless of what was in their path.

And... right after they passed by, something else leapt out after them. It almost looked like it was carrying something large with it, but all Nosapp could see in his limited vision was that it was a beast with thick fur. It ran forward, chasing after the two fleeing figures, its large eyes glinting as it raised a strange, shrill cry.

As Nosapp stood there dumbfounded, all three figures disappeared once more into the darkness.

“Gyaaaaa!”

“Heeeeelp!”

“Keekeekееееее!”

The screams faded into the distance as if they were a cord being wound up.

After a lengthy silence, Nosapp finally shook his head. He took a look at Conrad to find the chief researcher leisurely stroking his chin.

Nosapp opened his mouth, unsure of how to proceed. “...Chief Researcher Conrad.”

“Yes?”

“This is just a hunch, but...”

“Oho.”

“I don’t really know what’s going on, but I feel like we should head back.”

“I don’t really know either, but let us press on.”

“ ... ”

Fate. What a wonderful word.

Silently cursing his fate, Nosapp picked up the bag from the ground and shouldered it once again.

Chapter V: A Bed with No Rest

“I don’t accept this!”

“...Well, I don’t know what to tell you. All the hot spring inns here are pretty much the same.”

Of course, even if she said that calmly, with potato in her mouth, Orphen was still not going to accept it.

He raised his voice again. “So, what?! All the inns in this town are just fake hot spring inns?!”

“Yep,” Eris stated plainly as she ate, still looking completely unfazed.

Sheena, however, who was sitting next to her, sharply denied it while she tore off a piece of bread. “That’s not true!” She was supposed to be Eris’s mother, and they did sort of have the same vibe to them when they sat next to each other, but it was hard to imagine it considering the difference in their ages. She slapped the table and shouted, “They are not fake! The water is scientifically synthesized with all the ingredients of a proper hot spring! They’re more effective than the real thing!”

Dinner was, needless to say, not a cheery affair. There was no particular problem with the menu. It might have been rather simple fare for an inn, but the soup, the bread, and the chicken legs were all delicious enough for Claiomh to raise a cheer about them as she ate.

But there were other issues.

Orphen narrowed his eyes and looked at Sheena, asking her suspiciously, “What ingredients exactly are those?”

She nodded with full confidence. “Dye and fragrance.”

“That’s just colored water, it’s not a hot spring!” he shouted immediately, but Sheena didn’t seem at all bothered.

She continued to nod her head, going on, “Incidentally, the effect is that... if

you stay in for long enough, your skin turns the color of the water.”

“That’s not an effect!”

“Another effect is that even if you don’t stay in for very long, your skin can react to it. That’d be because of the dye.”

“If you’re gonna insist on acting like those are real hot spring effects, then I might have something to say about it.”

Orphen cracked his knuckles, and Majic, who was sitting next to him quietly cutting up his chicken, said placatingly, “Now, now. Why don’t you calm down, Master?”

“Yeah. I thought you could barely move because you were so sore, anyway.” That would be Claiomh, on his other side.

Held back from both sides, Orphen sighed. Losing his momentum, he simply fell back into his chair. To show that he’d calmed down, he picked up his knife and fork and muttered, defeated, “Sheesh... I finally know why Master and Tish made fun of me so much when I said I wanted to come here.”

“It’s pretty well known to the people who are used to traveling on the eastern side, apparently,” Eris said nonchalantly, with a bit of a resigned look up at the ceiling.

“But the guide said that there were a bunch of hot spring inns and you could enjoy high-quality baths for low prices at every one of them...” Claiomh said with some regret.

Eris shrugged. “Well, there are plenty of hot spring inns, and all of them claim their spring is the best... but none of them claim theirs is natural.”

“That’s what you call fraud.” Orphen could hear his displeasure dripping from his voice. He pointed at Majic with his fork and said, “This kid’s house was probably one of the inns with the fewest customers on the continent, but they didn’t ever swindle anybody.”

“I keep telling you not to flaunt that as if it’s not entirely your fault.”

Orphen ignored Majic and shut his eyes, shaking his head. He could feel the boy’s gaze piercing him, but he didn’t let it bother him.

Opening his eyes, he said with a completely straight face, “Anyway, since fraud is bad, I think you should stop working us so hard.”

“I’m not sure what to say to that...” Eris wrinkled her brow incredulously.

For some reason, Claiomh agreed with her, pursing her lips. “She’s right, Orphen. And anyway, it’s better than having nothing to do, isn’t it?”

“I’d like to hear you say that after you’ve had firewood duty.” Orphen stuck his lips out as if to compete with her. “And anyway, there’s no reason to stay here anymore if there aren’t any hot springs. If you’re just gonna put us to work without pay again like today, then we’ll just leave tomorrow.”

“I see.” Eris’s response was short and to the point. Her voice was without emotion, mere sounds. Sounds with the same depth of meaning as a fork scraping across a plate, or Majic dropping his potatoes on the table. There was no vitality to them, no evidence that they had come from a human being.

Possessed by an inexplicable sense of hesitation, Orphen spent some time in silence. He even held his breath, merely waiting. If he were living on reflex only, he might have waited there for eternity. That was how complete the silence was.

But he suddenly realized something and frowned. “Huh?” was his short response.

Eris seemed genuinely surprised at his confusion. She blinked like his question was unexpected and said, “Hm? What is it?”

“Er, well...” Orphen said haltingly. “Is that... okay? If we leave tomorrow.”

“You’re free to make your own decisions.”

It wasn’t sarcasm. If it was, then the woman in front of him had an unparalleled talent for sarcasm. So Orphen thought. But such a talent was meaningless. There was no point in sarcasm that couldn’t be identified as such by the listener. So it likely wasn’t sarcasm.

Orphen admitted that, skeptical as he was. “...Alright. Then we’ll leave tomorrow. That’s fine with you guys, right?”

“Sure.”

“Yeah. I wanted to sightsee a little more, but now that I think about it, we can sightsee wherever we go.”

Finding agreement on both sides, Orphen gave Eris a look. She was just cutting up her chicken leg like she had not a single opinion on the matter. Like she didn't care a whit about them.

She doesn't care. Orphen finally realized. She well and truly didn't care. No matter what happened, from the bottom of her heart.

The night sky.

The night sky was the same no matter where on the continent you looked up at it from. The familiar stars were always in the same place, looking down on the earth, where each night was never the same as another one. The unchanging sky reflected the ever-changing earth like a flawless mirror. It surely had more meaning than just serving as consolation to the people who looked up at it. Of course, maybe believing that was just a human fantasy...

Orphen looked up at the sky. He had arrived at a certain truth. And that truth was... *I'm not gonna be able to sleep if I'm staring up at the sky.*

In the end, all he was left with after chopping wood was sore muscles, and he didn't have the spare energy to put up the tent again, so he and Majic had shoved the tent aside and were trying to sleep in sleeping bags in the backyard. Maybe because of the high altitude, there weren't very many bugs, which was nice, but it was plenty cold in exchange.

Snug in the sleeping bag like a painting in a frame, Orphen was having a hard time falling asleep. *Geez... What's the problem?* He sat up and looked over at the sleeping bag next to him—Majic appeared to be sound asleep inside it. He must have been tired from all the work he'd done.

Orphen sighed, rubbing his arms. “My body just doesn't want to sleep...” he muttered to himself. He was tired, but even if he closed his eyes, his mind just went in circles chasing all sorts of pointless thoughts. Even when he was tired of thinking, sleep didn't come no matter how long he waited. Something was eating at him.

He looked up again, though not at the sky. He was looking at the inn building. It was a giant shadow looming in the darkness of the night.

All was quiet. So quiet it almost seemed like the building was abandoned. The fact that he was looking up at it from the unkempt backyard probably didn't help there.

Measuring the distance to the roof by eye, Orphen slipped out of his sleeping bag. He stood up and stretched. His muscles weren't aching quite so badly now.

"I bound across thee, Snowcapped Mountain..." he whispered. The weight disappeared from his body and he leapt up. Jumping—no, flying—several meters, he landed on the roof of the inn. When he looked up, he saw the same night sky he'd seen from below. And when he looked around, he saw the hot spring town extending out all around him.

It was a strange town, full of hot spring inns large and small and nothing else. It was also connected to Nashwater at the foot of the mountain. There was a path connecting them—or rather, the hot spring town didn't connect to anywhere else below—and carriages moved between them carrying people and goods. Just the cost of moving between them fueled their economy. It was sort of like one city split in two, each giving vitality to the other. Considering the fact that almost every other town in Kiesalهما was a self-contained entity, this hot spring town really was unique in many ways. Plus... *It's a hot spring town with no hot springs...* He sighed, feeling rather fed-up.

There better not be weird-ass towns like this all over the place. Everyone says the eastern side is like a land of demons, and maybe they're right...

There was one time in his past when he traveled the east of the continent. It was five years ago. Though basically everything about his situation was different than it was now.

Five years ago, huh... Yeah, a lot's changed...

He looked up again. At that same night sky. Not a single star fell down to meet him. The scenery was the same as ever. He smiled bitterly at the unfairness of the night sky being the only thing that never changed.

If people wanted to change, suffering was forced upon them, and if they

didn't want to change, they were given tragedies. People were always suffering. Of course, since all people suffered, their happiness was very fair.

I meant to rest here in this hot spring town, and make it my final vacation... he thought to himself with no particular emotion.



Well, if it gets me going quicker, I guess that's for the best. I might have to search the entire continent, after all, Azalie... Whispering the name of his sister, Orphen smiled to himself.

But in the next instant, that smile was gone.

He blinked. In the silent night air, there was a single quiver, almost like a ripple.

There's someone...?

Orphen crouched on the roof, recalling his Master teaching him once that “footsteps” could be classified into two categories. There was a simple difference between them. “Footsteps you can hear and footsteps you can't.”

Everyone outside of Master Childman Powderfield's class had thought him a taciturn man, and on the surface, they were right, but... he was also a man who liked to tell jokes that weren't funny. Of course, since he never told the same joke twice, that was just proof of how taciturn he was.

He had also said this. “If they hide their footsteps, but they still make them, then they're human.” At the time, Orphen couldn't tell if his words were a lesson or just a continuation of the joke, and even now, he was still unsure, but he had come to his own conclusion.

Even if he heard footsteps, he couldn't trust his ears, so he must move to a place where he could see his enemy. And if that isn't possible, stay hidden.

He stayed low on the roof and waited to see what would happen. Of course, this could all have just been his imagination. It was just a hot spring town. There shouldn't be any danger here...

The footsteps grew louder and more clear to him. They did seem to be trying to hide them, but even if you slid your feet along at a regular pace, you wouldn't be able to walk completely soundlessly. Since humans are made to support their entire weight on two feet, they needed some help to be able to walk without any sound. Soft-soled shoes, or something like that... the fact that the person didn't have anything like that meant that they were just an amateur trying to conceal their footsteps.

In the city, it probably wasn't rare to find people sneaking about in the middle of the night. People had all sorts of reasons to do so. Maybe that was all the more true of a tourist town like this, with all the sources of entertainment it had.

Orphen narrowed his eyes and looked around. The nearest window which was lit was far away—the Branch of the Forest Lodge was set slightly apart from the other inns in the town. It was the sort of place where people in other inns wouldn't notice a commotion. And there probably weren't too many tourists who would go out of their way to approach a place like that.

Did those researchers who left the inn in the evening come back...? He theorized, but he quickly rejected the idea. No. There were two researchers, but he could only hear one set of footsteps.

As they approached, he sharpened his senses. As he focused on the familiar sensation of the night air on his skin, he felt almost like his sight and his hearing were merging to become one single sense. That sense would be his weapon. He was sure of it. He could tell what was getting closer and what was getting farther away. The sound of his own breathing disappeared.

The footsteps stopped at the entrance to the inn.

In the shadows of the roof, Orphen couldn't see the person producing the footsteps, but he got into a position he'd be able to leap out from and slowly raised the top half of his body. He could step out and leap off the roof to capture the person, as long as he didn't think about what falling to the ground would do to him. The ground was about eight meters away. In order to land safely, he'd need to use sorcery.

The moment he leapt down from the roof, if his opponent had the reflexes and quick decision-making skills to attack him somehow—say, with a thrown implement—he'd have to rely on luck to deflect the attack.

Orphen reluctantly made his decision. As long as nothing happened, jumping out without a plan was probably a foolish move. If all the person did was break a window or pick open a lock, he should probably just ignore them.

Then... he smelled something.

“...?” He frowned, his nose twitching. There was an irritating odor assaulting his nostrils, blatantly distinct from the fragrance of the night air.

It's oil...! He hadn't taken that into consideration.

He reflexively leapt up, not thinking about what might happen next. He rose to his feet on the roof and jumped forward into the air without even looking down at the ground.

“I bound across thee, Snowcapped Mountain!” he shouted his spell, releasing the large sorcerous composition into the air. The composition instantly neutralized gravity, slowing Orphen's falling speed. He reflexively felt some fear of hitting the ground thanks to the sensation of falling remaining in him, but the impact when he did hit the ground was light. Being careful not to let the discrepancy trip him up, Orphen turned around swiftly.

He was at the entrance to the inn, and there was a man standing slightly apart from the door. His height wasn't much different from Orphen's, but the man's build was a little larger than him. It was a little hard to tell in the dark, but there wasn't much fat on the man. His physique was well-crafted. Orphen could sense his youth in his actions—he seemed quick and strong, but restless. He had frozen in surprise when Orphen suddenly dropped down from the roof.

There was something in his hands. A container. It must have had the oil in it. The man was clearly in the process of tossing the oil onto the inn's wall.

Sizing the man up, Orphen asked him, “Arson? That's a pretty nasty hobby...”

“Ugh...” The man probably wasn't able to understand what had happened. Someone had just leapt down from the roof, after all. Cradling the jug, he spun around and ran off.

“You're not getting away!” He didn't need to say it aloud, but Orphen did so anyway. He chased after the fleeing man.

The man's running form was all over the place because of his panic, but he was still fast. It would be simple enough to launch an attack on him from a distance with sorcery, but since the man was carrying a jug of oil, even if Orphen held back, the man was liable to go up in flames if he attacked.

Their game of tag continued for half a minute or so. At that point, the man

had turned a few corners and Orphen had lost track of what route they'd taken. The man was finally slowing, perhaps running out of stamina.

I'll catch up to him in ten seconds... Orphen calculated intuitively. He tried to slow his breathing as much as he could and lightly clenched a fist.

It was surprisingly difficult to attack a fleeing adversary from behind, since you had to run faster than them to catch up. Jumping on them and tackling them was the best way to do it, but you'd be in big trouble if they had a weapon.

Orphen continued forward, almost upon him. But just then—

The distance between them vanished.

What?! Orphen opened his eyes wide.

The man had stopped and turned around. He'd tossed aside the jug of oil and was holding something, crouched low. There wasn't enough light for Orphen to tell at an instant what it was. He couldn't dodge something he couldn't see, and he didn't have the space to leap to the side, either.

Aw, the hell with it! Orphen entrusted all of his momentum to his fist, basically just praying at this point. He thrust his fist straight out at the man, counting on his adversary also not having any space to dodge him. Whoever was fastest should win, he reasoned.

In the space of a single second, the battle came to an end. Orphen almost felt like he'd missed it. He couldn't sense the result of their showdown. A moment later, he and the man were left just standing there.

He broke out into a cold sweat. He didn't feel any pain. Those were the only two things Orphen could sense until he heard a thud as the man fell down. There was a scraping sound as his body hit the stone pavement. A small knife had fallen from the man's hand.

With a short sigh, Orphen took two steps back. The power from his full-speed dash had been pounded straight into the man through his fist. He didn't think the man was capable of making a fiercer counterattack than that, but it never hurt to be cautious in a battle where your opponent wouldn't think twice about pulling a knife on you.

The man was trembling, and didn't seem to be able to move. The sideways stance he'd been in to attack had backfired, and he'd taken Orphen's blow right in the side.

Orphen picked up the knife on the ground and shrugged. Not that his adversary could see that. "Now then... pointing blades at people and setting fire to houses ain't normal... and you're not gonna tell me you didn't know that, right?"

"Damm...it..." the man managed to spit out, his mouth flapping like a fish's.

Orphen moved his gaze from the man to the jug of oil he'd tossed aside. "I'm guessing this isn't just some childish hobby of yours. What are you after?"

The man didn't answer. His eyes were just locked on a random spot on the stone road.

Orphen sighed, though it wasn't like he was expecting the man to just blab about his motives.

When he got a better look at him, he found the man to be rather young. He probably wasn't too far apart from Orphen in age. He was wearing a black jacket and sunglasses, possibly as some sort of disguise. He didn't seem to mind not being able to see anything, wearing sunglasses at night.

"Well, whatever," Orphen mused as he played with the knife in his hand. "The arson and the assault both ended as attempts. There are no witnesses, so even if I brought you to the police, you could just say, 'I dunno what he's talking about' and get out of it. I'm gonna tell you right now that this won't happen again, though. The next time I see your face, I'm carrying out vigilante justice on your—" He stopped there.

The man was still frozen, Orphen standing over him. There were barely any sources of light in the town at night, but he realized he could see his shadow as he looked down at the man. There was a swaying, red light casting the shadow at his feet...

"What?!" Orphen turned around, clucking his tongue. Behind him—the direction they'd come running from. Far in the distance, he could see red flames. Right around where the inn was.

“Fire...?” That was the only word that came to mind. There were flames in the distance, providing a faint light in the night.

Crunch! There was the scrape of gravel moving, and when Orphen turned back around, he found the man had risen and was beginning to flee. He was dragging one leg a little as he fled beyond the light of the flames.

“Tch...” Orphen hesitated over whether to chase after him or not, but... “Dammit! I gotta go back!” he spat, and ran off in the direction of the inn.

He sped back even faster than he’d come. He had to return even one moment faster. Orphen ran, spurring his body forward almost with threats.

The color of the flames was almost bright in the sky now, the sound of the fire crackling growing louder in his ears. He urged his body forward, though it wasn’t as though his feelings could make him run any faster.

He turned the final corner, and looked for the inn without slowing down.

It looked like it was engulfed in flames.

He panicked for a moment, but as he got closer, he realized that he was just seeing things. When he got a better look, he realized the blaze was only around the entrance, where the oil had been splashed on the building. The flames roared up all the way to the guest rooms on the second floor. It would be dangerous if left alone, of course, but there shouldn’t be anyone in said guest rooms at the moment, and there wouldn’t be anyone sleeping in the entrance or the nearby hall either. There was probably no one in danger of suffocating from the smoke right now, at least.

Orphen ran up to the entrance, where the flames were taking in the night winds and howling. “Envelop and restrain,” he shouted, “this maniacal outburst!” Releasing his sorcery, he rewrote the world to his own specifications.

With his incantation, there was a crashing sound as the flames burst out of existence, leaving behind only the burnt wood. The only things that remained in the air were a warm wind and the distinct scent of burning oil.

He looked up and found that the inn hadn’t taken too much damage. Of course, it would probably still cost a pretty penny to repair it, but the building didn’t seem to have taken any structural damage, at least. As for the sign

hanging at the entrance, it had turned to cinders.

“Whoa! What is this?!”

Orphen turned around and found Majic approaching from the backyard. His eyes were open wide and he had incredible bedhead, maybe because he'd been sleeping in a weird position in his sleeping bag.

“Was there a fire? Why was it coming from the entrance?”

“It was arson, and I'm just as confused as you.” Orphen gave the simplest explanation that he could and looked around the area. The fire had probably only been burning for a minute or so before it was put out. It didn't seem like anyone in the neighborhood had noticed it.

“Arson?” Majic asked dubiously.

Orphen ignored him and puzzled over the situation. He just didn't get it. The reason for setting an inn on fire, for one thing, but also...

He didn't set any sort of timed device... I couldn't see too well, but he shouldn't have had the time to do something like that. If that was the case, how had the fire started? Did he have an accomplice? Shouldn't they have been working together from the start, then? Unless he knew I was up on the roof, I guess...

Maybe he had dropped a spark from a cigarette, but... in the dark of the night, something like that would have stood out. It would have been more unnatural for Orphen to have overlooked it.

Well... it's not like I'll figure it out by thinking about it. This is the police's job anyway... Now that actual arson had occurred, he felt like he shouldn't have let the guy get away.

In any case, his meditations were interrupted by a great commotion erupting from the burned entrance.

“God! What?! What?! What's going on?! Why is it burnt?! Oh, Orphen! Is that it?! Something's broken and Orphen's there, which means... Hey, Orphen, it doesn't really seem like you're gonna be able to talk your way out of this one, but if you promise to pay me a proper allowance every month, I get the feeling I

just might be able to believe you.”

Needless to say, the one who’d popped out of the entrance and started ranting and raving was Claiomh. She had overly large pajamas on, Leki on her head, and an ecstatic smile on her face. Maybe she just thought this was the perfect opportunity to demand an allowance. Either that or she was just not the type to be upset about being woken up.

After Claiomh came Eris, though at a much slower pace. She was also in pajamas, but wore something like a robe over them as well. This one, on the other hand, wore the same sort of surly expression she had on during the day, so that it was difficult to tell whether she was angry or just didn’t like being woken up.

She surveyed the damage to the entrance with half-closed eyes and said, “So those idiots are finally going this far...” There was no surprise whatsoever in her tone.

Orphen turned to her, not missing the comment. “You got an idea who’s behind this?” he asked her.

She sighed and, with a cursory wave of her hand, remarked, “It’s Lotz. They manage the whole area. On the surface, they’re running hot spring inns like the rest of us, but they’re basically a gang. The Lotz Group. They were on your travel brochure, right? They’re the only ones stupid enough to do something like this.”



“Lotz...” Orphen repeated the name and thought back to the man he’d chased. A gang. The image did seem to fit...

“I’ve got it!” Claiomh raised her hand, though Orphen had no idea what on earth she found so fun about this situation. In her “woohoo!” pose, she went on, “A peaceful hot spring town... and the evil hot spring inn that tries to control the town from the shadows... Then, a giant monster awakens from deep underground! But some travelers who just happen to be there at the time magnificently crush the awful conspiracy! It’s that sort of plot, right?”

“...A giant monster from underground...?”

Ignoring Majic’s question, Claiomh spun around and clenched her fist, shouting with undeserved confidence, “Once the case is solved, Majic chokes on a dumpling or something and the rest of us all laugh, and that’s how it ends.”

“...Why?”

“Why do you ask, ‘why’? Don’t you get that’s just how it goes?”

“Anyway,” Orphen cut Claiomh off and asked Eris, “Where’s your mom? I don’t see her. Is she still sleeping?”

“Mama’s—”

“Right here.” The diminutive woman appeared in the doorway with those curt words. She observed the damage to the inn with the same nonchalance as her daughter. She didn’t even say anything about it, however, merely giving a derisive snort.

Thus ended Orphen’s first day after his arrival at the Ledgeborne Hot Spring Town.

Chapter VI: Lost Investigators

Several hours earlier...

If someone asked him, the truth was... he confessed to no one. The truth was, he wasn't even sure he believed it himself.

He didn't particularly dislike saying things in a roundabout way, but he didn't think it was generally appreciated. Still, his oxygen-starved brain could only list off memories and phrases with no particular connection, like he was asleep. Maybe he *was* asleep and dreaming, Dortin surmised.

If he was dreaming, he would quickly wake up. He hoped he was dreaming. They could meet inside a dream.

The words just spun and spun, and never once reached a conclusion. But he couldn't even be frustrated about it either. All he could do was watch over his spinning, circular whirlpool of thoughts, and wait. He couldn't even think about what it was he was waiting for.

It wasn't that he was confused, he admitted with some disappointment. He wasn't particularly anything. He was just tired from running for hours and hours.

How many hours have I been running, anyway? Dortin asked himself, listening to the frenzied pounding of his heart deep in his own ears. He was aware it was no metaphor. It was no metaphor. It was exactly what it sounded like.

The sun had set completely by now. In fact, the world was enveloped in darkness. The darkness of night.

At times, he had sprinted as fast as he could, at times he had limped forward, exhausted, and at times, he had collapsed to the ground panting, but throughout it all, that thing had chased him. It had never caught up to him, but it followed behind doggedly, at a fixed distance the whole time.

What he could hardly believe himself was that he had been running for hours,

being chased by some unfathomable thing, and that the unfathomable thing in question had been chasing him for hours. He didn't understand it. Prey that would run for so long without giving up was one thing, but so was a beast who would chase after said prey for the same amount of time.

...Is it not a beast? His pursuer wouldn't show itself, so he couldn't be sure. The unfathomable creature merely became more and more terrifying in Dortin's mind the longer it went unseen.

He knew he should try to run in as straight a line as he could, but the nighttime forest was making that difficult. He meandered forward as he went, getting his face scratched by branches, catching his arms on trees, and tripping on roots all the while.

And beside him, Volkan ran in much the same way. The two panted and hacked in harmony as they ran. They were fatigued, their limbs heavy, and stars were twinkling in front of their eyes, opening up like gates. There was a stinging pain on the surface of their skin. There was no question that they were at their limit.

That's... it. I can't run anymore, Dortin told himself the same thing he'd said again and again since this chase had started. He couldn't run. If he couldn't run, then what should he do? As his thoughts spun around in his head, he couldn't reach a conclusion. There should have been a rather simple answer. A simple, clear answer.

"Dwah!" A shout came from beside him. His brother had finally lost his footing and fallen.

Dortin found himself stopping as well. A powerful sense of fatigue that he'd been feeling this whole time but unable to comprehend seeped into his brain, and he nearly blacked out.

Thud. Unable to resist it, Dortin fell to the ground. His body wouldn't budge after that. The simple, clear answer was this: if you're at your limit, then stop. Who cares what happens after that?

"A... ha, ahahahahaha." Hollow laughter that came from somewhere deep inside him, though he didn't know where, echoed through the forest. It felt incredibly unnatural to him that he was the source of that laughter. Unnatural,

and wrong.

But he didn't care about that right now. Dortin had chosen to relax and let whatever might happen, happen. And not just physically. His mind was equally exhausted.

"Ahahahahahahaha."

"Uuuuurgh!"

He could see his brother leaping vigorously to his feet. Was his brother immortal, or did he simply not understand that he was tired? Dortin didn't know.

Volkan clenched his fist, wrinkled his chin, and shouted, "Now that I think about it, I don't understand why I, the Bulldog of Masmaturia, the Great Vulcano Volkan, have to run around like this, getting out of breath!"

"Ahahahahahahaha." Dortin just kept laughing, unable to use his brain to think any longer.

His brother kept on shouting. "Nothing exists in this world that can dampen a hero's courage! Which means, it's just, like, inconceivable for me to be running around scared of something! Inconceivable! That's jargon for impossible!"

"Ahahahahahahaha."

"So I'm not gonna run anymore! I'm not gonna do it! 'Cause I'm tired. And if some Absurd Great King is gonna run around chasing the supreme warrior, the Great Vulcano Volkan, then I'm gonna defeat you with a super sword move, like the Heaven Icicle Reverse Manji Slash or something like that!"

"Ahahahaha. Hahahaha."

"Or I'll beat you by giving you a teddy bear present!"

"Ahaha heehee hoohoo hohoho hahee hoho."

"...I'll kill you... Umm, so... uhh..."

His brother spoke haltingly for a short while, then suddenly turned to Dortin and whispered to him, "Hey, Dortin. Even I'm not gonna be sure how to end it if you don't say something."

“Ahahaha, heeheehee, wahahaheheh—” Dortin’s head wobbled as he laughed, before he suddenly fell quiet. His mind was gradually regaining clarity... “Say, Brother.”

“What is it, Dortin?”

“I don’t think the teddy bear thing is going to work.”

“Who cares about thaaaaat?!”

Gong! His brother drew his sword and struck him on the head with it and Dortin plopped to the ground. But apparently, that was a good enough ending for Volkan, who then raised his sword into the air and shouted, “Mm! Now, come at me! Super Move, Icicle Backwards Sl—”

He stopped for a moment before continuing, “Well, it’s a little different, but the gist is the same, so it’s fine! Anyway, the Great Vulcano Volkan will slay you with his gruesome ability, so come out to a place where I can see you! Then I’ll point my finger and go, ‘oh!’ and you’ll look in that direction—”

“Hey, Brother...” Dortin called out to him from the ground, not because he wanted to be there or anything, but because he was completely out of strength and couldn’t move, although it was also true that the damp ground felt very pleasant to his cheek.

Volkan spun around swiftly to face him. “What is it, Dortin?”

“I’ve been wondering this for a while now...” That was a lie. He’d only been able to strike down his aimless eddies of thought and arrive at a conclusion after they’d stopped moving. In any case, Dortin had suddenly realized something. “What even is it that’s been chasing us all this time?”

It wasn’t like he’d been particularly expecting anything from him, but just as he figured, Volkan had no sort of answer to his question. He was just standing there with his eyes wide open. He opened his mouth as well, but Dortin already knew that when his brother looked like this, he usually had no idea what was going on.

“Mm. Well, I’m sure it’s a formidable enough foe to be a fitting entry on Vulcano Volkan’s list of heroic achievements.”

Ignoring him for now, Dortin went on, “Listen, if it were a wild dog or something like that, I think it’s weird that it hasn’t chased us down in all this time. I mean, we haven’t been running for hours straight. We took some breaks, and the thing didn’t catch up to us.”

“Mm. A truly pedestrian observation that anyone would be capable of making, but I will permit you to go on, little brother.”

“Thanks. So I was thinking... I still don’t know what it is that’s behind us, but maybe it isn’t chasing us. Maybe it’s just following us. That’s why it hasn’t caught up to us but it’s stayed behind us all this—”

“True! Your brother was also thinking that!” Volkan shouted, cutting him off, and tears started to spill from his eyes. “To think you would reach a conclusion that may or may not resemble your magnificent brother’s... I may or may not think you’re deserving of praise for possibly growing a little, or perhaps not at all! That’s not something any mere person is capable of! So... what should we do?”

“Well... I can’t move anymore, so my only choice is to stay still here.”

“Mm. The same exact conclusion your brother reached,” Volkan said, full of confidence, and sat on the ground with a heavy thud. He must have been tired after all.

The scarce moonlight filtering through the leaves of the branches above was the only light source here, but for how dark it was all around them, Dortin thought he could make out the expression on his brother’s face. But that was the only thing he could see.

He could hear the rustling sounds of the forest. But he couldn’t see any of the things making those sounds. If it was possible for senses to hunger, then he was feeling absolutely famished for sight. His hearing had become overly sensitive, and was picking up every little boring sound.

Rustle... The sound of stepping on grass. Or was it the wind rustling a branch? Dortin couldn’t tell, so he looked to his brother. Volkan was sitting still, staring at a single point... in the complete opposite direction the noise had come from. Apparently, he hadn’t heard it.

Eventually, the sound became louder and louder. Loud enough that he couldn't pass it off as just his imagination any longer.

He even heard a voice.

...*A voice?!* Dortin asked himself. He was so exhausted he couldn't move, but he used the last of his strength to lift his head.

He was certain of it. He had heard voices.

"We're really in a pickle now, Researcher Nosapp. From my point of view, I'd say the direction of our destination and our own location have become rather vague."

"I suppose so, Chief Researcher... Actually, I'd just say we're lost."

"I see. So that's what it's like from your point of view."

The voices were growing closer as he listened to them.

Voices. Human voices. Speaking the human language, with a nasally, eastern accent.

Dortin rose with some unknown power that shocked even him and turned to his brother. "Brother! Did you hear that?"

"Mm." Volkan nodded and drew his sword, pointing it in the direction the voices were coming from. While still seated. "Dunno who they are, but they must be idiots to be lost out here."

"...I really think we're the last people who should be saying that, but..." Dortin muttered under his breath, adjusting his glasses.

He could see a light brighter than what was coming down from above, shining through the breaks in the trees. It must have been a portable gas lamp or something. The light swayed with the same timing as the crunching of the grass.

They were stepping over vegetation and pushing aside tree branches as they went, so Dortin could tell exactly where they were and which direction they were moving. Even if he ignored the fact that they were having a conversation, they were clearly not wild animals. He was almost certain they were human.

They are human, right? There aren't any wild animals that talk, right? Wait,

was there a scary beast here in the west that makes sounds resembling human words to get close to people so it can eat them? Dortin thought as hard as he could. Actually, it felt more like his soul had separated from his body and was having a conversation with someone. He had to convince this person, so he mustered all the words and knowledge that he could. Of course, the person that he was trying to convince might have just been himself.

Right. That was hunted to extinction over 30 years ago, I think... and since it just made sounds close to human words, it's not like it could actually speak. So the things coming closer right now are human. "Researcher Nosapp" and "Chief Researcher"... They almost sound like a comic relief duo in some play. But comic relief duos don't capture people and eat them, so I guess that's fine. Yeah.

As he watched, the light continued to approach. Since he couldn't move anyway, it wasn't like he had a ton of options depending on what it was that was approaching, but Dortin tried not to think about that.

But now that I think about it, it doesn't really do us any good if a comic relief duo finds us... They were talking about how they were lost, too. Although, it's nice that they have a light with them. I'd be even happier if they had a burly forest guide type with them, too. Maybe that's asking too much.

Being puzzled was, in a way, a blessing. It allowed him to think. Terror obstructed thought, and it was at the end of a moment when he was unable to think that death would come.

Finally, the darkness parted, revealing a plump figure from between the trees, the round light of a gas lamp coming from his hands.

A thin, younger man came from behind this one. He had a ludicrously large pack on his back. Even in the light of the gas lamp, his face looked dark. Maybe it was just because his head was hanging due to the weight of his pack, but even so, he didn't look well. He was clearly very fatigued.

In any case, the words stopped then, and the four of them just stared at each other, dumbfounded. It wasn't both pairs, but each individual, looking at each other's faces and for some reason or another forgetting how to think logically. Even Dortin had completely stopped asking himself what he should do. All he did was stare.

The first to open his mouth was the middle-aged man with the light. “Oh.”

From his voice, he was probably the one being called “Chief Researcher” before.

With a surprised look on his face, he continued, “This must be... Researcher Nosapp...” he addressed the thin man behind him—that must have been Nosapp. “What would you say this is? I was wondering about it when we caught a glance of them before...”

“About what, Chief Researcher?” Nosapp seemed to be wearing an expression that said he had absolutely no interest in this discussion. Dortin even sensed that the man was thinking something like, “If we’re going to stop, we could at least rest, but I’m fully aware you’re not going to let me do that, are you?” as well.

He could also sense that the person those thoughts were directed at, the Chief Researcher, was completely unaware of them.

The man continued without a care, “Mm... Have you not heard of them? I’ve heard they’re abundant in the undiscovered lands of the west... but I didn’t think they’d be here, too.”

“Huh...?” Nosapp asked.

The Chief Researcher gave him a rather disappointed look and pointed his finger at Volkan and Dortin. “Why, there was a research thesis turned in last year on killer mushrooms that lurk in forests in the guise of human beings and infect those foolish travelers who get too close to them with their hyphae, was there not? It is rather a surprise to happen upon some ourselves, though.”

“Who the hell’s a mushroom?!” Volkan finally broke out of his stupor and shot up. The two humans backed up with exclamations of surprise.

Taking a step forward, Volkan brandished his sword. “You dare call the folk hero, the Bulldog of Masmaturia, the Great Vulcano Volkan a killer mushroom?! Well, you’ve got reckless courage, I’ll give you that! And in honor of such baffling courage, I’ll kill you by growing oranges in a terraced field, you bastards!”

“Ohhh?!”

“Chief Researcher, you think that sword is a hypha?!”

“It is nooooooooooooooot!”

“Err, umm...” Dortin hesitantly raised his hand, butting into the conversation. “We’re not mushrooms...”

“What?!” The Chief Researcher reacted with overblown surprise, like he was thoroughly taken aback by that information, and shook his head. “Not mushrooms... Then... ca...?”

“Ca...?”

“Cabbages?”

“We’re not mushrooms or cabbages or radishes or carrots, to say nothing of nobly blooming roses!” Volkan shouted, swinging his sword about. “No matter what anyone says, I will always be the eternal champion! The demon king whose fate is entrusted to his sword! The Great Vulcano Volkan!”

“And I’m his brother Dortin.”

“Ohh, I see.” After they said their introductions, the Chief Researcher put his straight face back on. “I am Conrad, Chief Researcher of the Ledgeborne Branch of the Northern Section of the Union of Lords’ Ruin Investigation Research Council. And this is Researcher Nosapp, my assistant on this investigation. Haha, what a nice night for a walk, wouldn’t you say?”

“Well... I’m not sure what to say to this 180 in your attitude, exactly...” Dortin professed awkwardly. At the same time, there was something bothering him. *The Union of Lords’ Ruin Investigation Research Council... Ruin Investigation?*

When humans said “ruins,” they almost always meant one thing: the ruins left behind by the dragons who used to rule the continent, the Celestials, or Nornir, who had a close relationship to humanity.

“Mm.” Volkan was nodding, putting his sword back in its sheath. “Well, I don’t really get it, but as long as you don’t mistake the Black Lightning of Masmaturia, who sings in the gentle breeze of a waterfall and burns gold, the Bulldog, the Great Vulcano Volkan, for a mushroom again...”

His titles had increased. He must not have wanted to have a shorter name

than the Chief Researcher. Of course, none of this mattered in the slightest to Dortin.

“Anyway...” Dortin muttered, raising his head.

Conrad just happened to be muttering and raising his head at the exact same moment.

“So, what are you doing in a place like this...?” the two of them asked the same exact question at the same exact time.

“Oho, I see. So this evil debt collector threw you off a cliff? What a disaster.”

“A disaster, eh...? I don’t think it can really be summed up in such a simple word. I believe it’s something much more deep-seated, maybe even something like fate, personally...”

The four of them had sat down and were explaining their circumstances. It had been thirty minutes or so, and Dortin had given them a rough summary of the reason they were lost in such a place.

Conrad had listened intently the whole time, sometimes interjecting with short phrases to indicate his interest, but the man called Nosapp was silent the whole time, his eyes shut like he had no interest in any of it. He might have even been napping.

Behind the dozing Nosapp, Volkan was very brazenly investigating the contents of the enormous pack the man had been carrying. Dortin was pretending he couldn’t see him, and Conrad didn’t seem particularly bothered by it either as Volkan happily rummaged through the backpack. Maybe he was looking for food. He probably was. No, he definitely was.

Conrad nodded emotionally, lighting the next of several cigarettes he’d smoked during their conversation. “My oh my, fate truly is an incomprehensible thing, isn’t it? Or maybe we just call every little thing we can’t comprehend ‘fate.’ There are probably not too many people in the history of the continent who’ve been thrown off cliffs by debt collectors, and yet that exact thing happened to you, and then you ran into me. What do you say to this theory? I think being thrown off a cliff by a debt collector is probably as rare an

experience as making a living as a boxer due to the curse of a gold watch. In which case, there's a chance I could meet a boxer who's been cursed by a gold watch tonight, isn't there?"

"Well, I'm not sure what to say to that..." Dortin groaned in confusion.

However, Conrad went right on without a care, "Hmm. Speaking of boxers, there's that theory that the royal palace boxer Kinoman hasn't been doing too well lately because he let an opponent die accidentally, right? But to me, I can only see that wide right hook of his as something he's doing on purpose, having gotten a taste for murder and wanting another 'accident' to occur."

"Err, I've never heard of him..."

"Ah, that's right. I was speaking to a younger researcher recently, and the man was saying completely incomprehensible things, like he should be able to put electricity into a simple wheel. I told him to go wash his face in some ice water and he said something absolutely frightening to me: 'You'll regret this.' That's a threat, you know. I reported him to the police, of course."

"Uhhh..."

The way he saw it, Dortin had plenty of options here.

One: Yell—"NOBODY GIVES A SHIT ABOUT ANY OF THAT! (SHOVE)" No, killing him was probably going too far. Probably.

Two: Cry—"I don't care about that. But what's going to happen to us? (sob sob)" No, asking him that wouldn't get them anywhere.

Three: Seek clarification—"Huh?" Out of the question. If he actually asked for clarification, he got the sense he would really receive a detailed explanation.

In the end, Dortin chose the most typical option.

"I see." A vague acknowledgment. "So... That's why we're lost here, but what about you two?" he asked.

Conrad took a deep breath and expelled it slowly. It created a bit of a breeze on Dortin's face when it came out of his nose, in fact. "We're... Well, we're doing exactly as you might expect, given our positions."

"...Ruin investigation?"

“Indeed. Just recently, we discovered an incredibly valuable historical document. It wasn’t as if it was a direct account of a ruin in the area, but there were some parts of it we took interest in, and that’s what we’re here to investigate.”

“A historical document... And you said you discovered it recently? Were you really able to decipher it that quickly?”

Much like with ruins, when human scholars referenced “historical documents,” they were almost always talking about Celestial records. Dortin recalled the female sorcerer they were with about a month ago taking quite a bit of time to read something of that nature, which was why he asked about it.

However, Conrad merely laughed like it was also strange to him. “Haha. Well, it was in contemporary script.”

“Wouldn’t it not be a historical document, then...?”

“Yes, that’s what the main office also said, so they wouldn’t spare a budget for us. That’s why it’s just the two of us out here on our lonesome. Isn’t that right, Researcher Nosapp?”

“Yes... I suppose you’re right... Chief Researcher...” Nosapp responded, though from his tone, it almost sounded like he was just talking in his sleep.

That didn’t bother Conrad, who looked fully satisfied by the exchange. He nodded exaggeratedly, his eyes sparkling in the light of the gas lamp. “Were you aware? It’s said there was a Celestial execution site in this area. Most of it was buried in a volcanic eruption, but it was around that time that the Celestials destroyed all the volcanoes, so now there isn’t a single drop of lava in the area. As yet, only a partial facility has been discovered, and after the investigation of it was finished, it was opened to tourists for a fee. But the most important thing hasn’t been discovered yet.”

“Huh...?”

“You don’t know what I mean?” Conrad’s eyes were practically bursting with joy as he asked the question, gleaming and sparkling with light. They were like a child’s eyes, or perhaps even someone younger than a child.

“I don’t know,” Dortin responded honestly, and Conrad nodded, looking even

happier.

“Mm...” He took a drag on his cigarette and caught his breath before continuing. “Do you know how Celestials were executed?”

“Hm? No...”

“That ancient species... the ‘ancient sorcerers,’ as the current sorcerers call them, were possessed of powerful sorcery. It was not a trivial task to end their lives... If they wanted to, they could even separate their consciousness from their body and go on living by taking over the executioner’s body, for example. I’m sure you know this, but their sorcery was so powerful, they could even alter the continent’s terrain, after all. It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say there was practically nothing they couldn’t do.”

“So I hear. I mean, there are dragons back where we came from, too,” Dortin muttered, recalling the great masses of metal that could be found all around Masmaturia like they were part of the landscape. It was very true that dragons could manipulate and control the terrain, nature, and the very laws of the world.

Conrad grinned, forming a more obvious smile than the bland one he’d been wearing up until now. “Quite. Their powerful sorcery can defend their own bodies perfectly. So, what must they do to execute one of their own? It’s not unusual that you don’t know, to be honest. After all, no one knows. That’s because we have yet to find a facility that makes it clear just what execution method they used. The actual place where executions occurred.”

“And that’s near here?”

“That’s what they say. We just haven’t been able to get a proper survey team out here, on account of the particularly vicious carnivores in the area.”

“...Huh?” Dortin asked, having heard something he couldn’t let slide.

At the same time—no, perhaps faster than him—Nosapp’s eyes snapped open and he shouted, “Chief Researcher?!” His voice broke as he exclaimed, “‘Vicious carnivores’?! I didn’t hear anything about that!”

“Oh. Is that so? I figured you knew, so I didn’t say anything. How very silly of me.”

“You can’t just scratch your head like that! How could you think it’s okay to come to a dangerous place like this, and so late at night, too?!”

“I was actually thinking the same thing myself.”

“If you were thinking it, then don’t do it!”

“It’s not good to have such a short fuse, you know.”

“That’s not relevant right now!”

After all this, Nosapp shot up, bringing the pack on his back and Volkan, who’d been digging through it, with him. He bit his lip in obvious distress and said, “Let’s hurry up and head back! I’ve had enough. I’m not putting up with this anymore! Why do I have to go through this when I should be taking classes in college?! It’s not fair, I tell you!”

“Nosapp took off after his outburst, but when he felt the wind blowing through his heart, he discovered the holes in it letting in the draft...”

“Who asked you to narrate?!”

“Well, just calm down, Researcher Nosapp. You’ll expend all your calcium.” Conrad’s tone remained carefree.

Feeling like he was watching some sort of skit, Dortin cut in, “Umm... so, what exactly are the dangerous beasts in the area?”

“Mm. About that...” Conrad explained, “All the people who wander around here—especially in this forest—end up as dismembered corpses at the foot of a cliff near the mountain path, so in truth, no one actually knows what manner of beast it is.”

“Why isn’t this place off-limits if it’s so dangerous?!” Nosapp shouted.

Conrad gave him a look like he was annoyed at the noise his assistant was making. “Why would they need to make the bottom of a cliff off-limits? There isn’t even a path to get down it.”

“Err...” Dortin cut in again. “Then how did you two get here?”

“Mm. We descended by rope. It was a lot of work, you know.”

“I should have known something was off then!” Nosapp wailed, clutching his

head.

Just then...

“Argh! Calm down!” A voice reverberated.

The shout had come from Volkan, who was standing proudly on top of Nosapp’s backpack. He had his arms crossed and a banana that he’d likely unearthed from the bag in his mouth, peel and all, as he said, “What’s a grown man have to be so scared of?! I don’t know what manner of beast we’re talking about here, but the Bulldog of Masmaturia will put down however many measly animals he needs to! I’ll kill them just like I’m stuffing them into a can!”

The whole group was silent for a bit after that.

The first to open his mouth was Nosapp. “...What are you doing up there?”

“Mm. Don’t worry about it,” Volkan proclaimed boldly before leaping down and swallowing the whole banana. He drew his sword and shouted to the heavens, “Heh! It seems you don’t know that they call this warrior, the Great Vulcano Volkan, Animal Slayer!”

“...It’s the first time I’m hearing it...”

Completely ignoring Dortin’s muttering, Volkan struck a fierce pose. “The battle on that nighttime street... I’m sure the neighboring residents still remember it to this day! Red moonlight illuminated the world. The foolish, sleeping world! I faced off with the fierce beast—”

“If it was on a street, then the beast must have been a stray dog, right...?” Dortin pointed out.

“What?! Is there something wrong with that?!” Volkan turned around, clearly flustered.

Nosapp decided to just ignore their exchange and raised his voice even higher. “I can’t believe this! I’m doomed! This isn’t what I left my family to study abroad for! I’m not even going to be listed as dying while conducting my research at this rate! My mom only has the money I send her to live on! What’s she going to do if I die and she doesn’t even get condolence money?!”

“That’s too bad, Researcher Nosapp.”

“Don’t just offer your sympathies! At least make an excuse or something!”

Nosapp shouted at Conrad, his eyes barely focused. He wasn’t lunging on the man or anything, but he sort of looked like he might sink his teeth into him if given a signal to.

Dortin decided to back off, figuring an outsider probably shouldn’t interfere. He’d also heard basically everything he wanted to know, so...

Rustle, rustle...

Dortin sighed. Not even the wind rustling the leaves worried him now, under the sound of the commotion. Or the sound of something stepping through the grass.

Wait... Stepping through the grass?

Dortin looked up. What was it? Something in the grass? His sight was plenty full thanks to the light from the gas lamp. His hearing too, amid all the commotion.

Because he wasn’t starved for sounds, he wasn’t greedily seeking out every little noise. So he’d missed it...

“Something in the grass—” That was the only thing Dortin could say in that instant.

No matter how many things happened in that instant, all Dortin could remember about it was that he said that. That was all Dortin managed to accomplish.

The instant began.

Conrad’s cheerful voice suddenly vanished. A red line appeared in the air. Dortin didn’t know what it was. If he’d known, he might have gone insane. All he saw was Conrad slowly falling. Right and left.

Not either right or left.

He was split in two from the top of his head down to his crotch, and he fell both to the right and the left.

A sword.



If your body is split in two, there's no way for it to stand upright anymore. That was obvious, so he thought of it even if he couldn't understand it. Conrad fell to the right and left, leaving only a red spray in the location he'd previously been standing in.

"Huh?" That was the only thing Nosapp could say as well. He would probably also only remember saying that later, Dortin thought. Maybe he shouldn't have bothered concerning himself about such things...

He quickly realized something was standing behind where Conrad's fallen body had been. A vicious beast. Dortin tried to apply that phrase to what he saw, but the words slipped away like a grease-covered component slipping from his hands instead of fitting into where it was supposed to go.

It was small. Probably shorter than Dortin. It stood on two legs, though since its torso was long, it didn't look like a two-legged creature.

It was holding something in its hand. Something long and sharp. Something that glinted in the light from Conrad's—Conrad, who'd fallen to the right and left—gas lamp.

"Ack?" There was hardly any tension in Nosapp's voice. It wasn't quite a scream. He seemed less surprised than taken aback as he tried to retreat.

A *thud* followed. It was the sound of him dropping his pack.

Dortin didn't move. He couldn't move. Splitting someone from their head down to their crotch... he was stuck questioning if such a thing was even possible. If it was, then... what sort of strength could do that? And with a sword. Bisecting a human being with a sword. The sword was on the small side, too. It definitely didn't look like the sort of thing that could be used to bisect someone. What sort of monstrous strength would be needed to make such a thing possible?

"Waaaaaaaaaaaah!" Coming back to his senses—Dortin was rather jealous of this, he admitted—Nosapp screamed. He spun around and ran off, beyond the edge of the lamplight. At full speed, he dashed into the darkness of the forest.

Meanwhile, Dortin couldn't move. So he didn't.

All he did was stare at the sudden interloper. If it was supposed to be a “beast,” it was a strange one. He couldn’t even identify the creature. It wasn’t that it had a shape wholly incompatible with the concept. In fact, when he looked at it, “beast” was exactly what came to mind.

Ook... ook... There was a strange sound. The beast must have made it.

It resembled a monkey. Actually, it *was* a monkey. He’d thought that monkeys had lighter fur, but the monkey in front of him right now didn’t. It was a blackish brown, like it had been charred by fire.

Its body was small. That was no illusion, it really was. What really confused him was the monkey’s hands. They were too human-like. Capable of wielding human tools. It was exactly like a monkey whose hands had been switched with human hands. No... there was one more thing that was clearly wrong.

The most unusual thing about the beast was its head. It had a monkey’s head. That much was clear. However, there was something like a cylindrical water tank on top of its head, like it was stuck to the monkey’s skull. The tank was glass, but the liquid inside it was cloudy and yellow, making it look disgusting and dirty.

Something round floated inside the tank.

It was a brain. A brain that was too large to fit inside a monkey’s skull floated inside the tank.

The monkey was looking at him. Unblinking.

Dortin reflexively realized—this was the beast that had been following them.

I’m sure of it. It was this thing. But... Why... did it suddenly attack? Before... it was just following us. The question came to mind, but not an answer. And...

“Nwhoooooa!” This time, it was his brother’s voice piercing the night air. He had his sword in his hand and was pointing it at the monkey and yelling, though Dortin had no idea whether he actually understood the situation or not.

“I don’t really get it, but!” So he didn’t. Well, it wasn’t like Dortin did either. In any case, Volkan continued, “I commend you for carrying around that thing stuck onto your head, for it looks heavy, but you ran out of luck when you came

across the Bulldog of Masmaturia! The killer blade of the animal slayer will bully you in various ways, you cheeky little beasty! Now, let me relax you to death with a muscle relaxant—”

“Umm, Brother—” But Dortin didn’t have enough time to finish with, “we should probably run.”

A shiver ran through him.

The chill told him that the instant wasn’t quite over yet.

The monkey moved.

In a single movement, it leapt in front of his brother and swung its arm. The arm that held the sword.

His brother’s head dropped to the ground.

“Huh?” The sound, obviously, came from Dortin and not Volkan.

Dortin sunk to the ground, this time completely unable to understand what was happening.

But.

The monkey turned toward him. Volkan’s body fell to the ground with a light *thud*. With no time to even sway through the air. The monkey had turned toward him.

Even if his brain wasn’t working, his body was nimble. The danger was beyond clear. Dortin turned tail and fled. Feeling the eyes of the monkey on him the whole time.

He was next.

He was sure he was next.

The words echoed inside him. He’d already given up. Yet his body continued to run. He knew there was no salvation waiting for him at the end of his flight. But he couldn’t stop himself.

He ran. He ran.

Ook!

The sharp sound echoed in his ears. It must have been the monkey's cry.

He sensed something. Behind him. Something...

Wham! He felt an impact, and Dortin tumbled to the ground. Something had stabbed him in the back. Probably the sword. The sword the monkey was holding. He wanted to scream, but he couldn't. All that escaped him was a weak breath.

I knew it. I was next...

He didn't feel any pain, and his consciousness was clear enough for him to hear footsteps.

Those footsteps meant the monkey was approaching. *What is it going to do to me? It's already killed me... What else is it going to do...?*

Dortin looked down at the sword stuck into his back. He could see the blade. It was pierced through his cape, buried in the ground. A sharp blade. He almost felt like he'd seen it somewhere before.

It wasn't the sort of sword a monkey should be wielding, Dortin thought vaguely. That's right... It looked more like the sort of shortsword an assassin would wield...

He gasped. The sword hadn't pierced his flesh! It was only stuck through his cape. The monkey was approaching... it was coming to see whether he was dead or not.

I need to stop breathing... and stop my heart, too!

Dortin prayed fervently. Praying wouldn't accomplish anything, but he prayed nonetheless.

Just think of it like it's a dream... I can do anything! He almost felt like he really had stopped breathing, and stopped his heart as well. He would become a stone. No one killed stones. That was a law of the natural world.

The footsteps... grew closer... but Dortin just continued to pray, not sparing a thought for them. He felt like he caught a whiff of the monkey's scent for a moment, but he tried not to think about it. Stones didn't think. And he was a stone! So... the monkey would simply pass him by. He prayed so fervently that,

if this was a religion, he would probably be a martyr for it.

He couldn't tell how much time had passed.

Fwsh! There was a footstep louder than the rest. What did it mean, Dörtin wondered.

He quickly realized: it was the sound of someone changing direction. After that, the footsteps faded into the distance. The monkey was leaving. He could tell the direction it was moving. It was headed after the fleeing Nosapp this time.

Dörtin sat up. He opened his eyes.

The monkey thought I was passed out. He tried to stand, and panicked when he found he couldn't. It took him a few seconds to realize it was because the shortsword was pinning his cloak to the ground.

That's why it went to chase after that Nosapp guy first. I need to get away from here quickly... before it comes back!

Dörtin pulled the shortsword from the ground almost without thinking. It was covered with dirt now, but it probably gleamed silver when it was clean. Its steel grip was cold and hard. Almost like it rejected warmth. A sword.

But... Dörtin stood, holding the sword. *What was that thing... what was that thing?!* Dörtin screamed soundlessly in confusion. His eyes were spinning. *Everything* was spinning. He didn't understand anything... there was no way he could.

Isn't this... Isn't this weird?! It's weird... it is! Uhh, right! It's against the rules! He sped through random thoughts as they came to him.

What was happening should have been impossible.

He had thought something like this was impossible! There was actually someone out there who would kill them?! *It can't be... This can't be...*

He shut his eyes, but that was a mistake. Behind his eyelids, he could see his brother's head separating from his body even clearer than he'd seen it before.

His brother's corpse! *It's impossible...* Dörtin repeated.

It was impossible. But that monkey—no, monster—had done the impossible.

There was another scream. It was the voice of the man named Nosapp. He seemed to be putting up a fight, but Dortin was sure of one thing.

There was nothing the man could do. None of them possessed a weapon that could make a difference against that monster.

The only one... who could stand up to it... An answer to the question surfaced in his mind.

He opened his eyes. His confusion was gone. He knew the answer now. A very certain answer.

There *was* someone who could stand up to this monster. No, he could probably contend with any monster on the continent—Dortin was sure of it!

“Waaaaaaaaaah!” he screamed—no, howled, and ran off at full speed. That man should still be nearby...

The strongest black sorcerer on the continent... He had sinister, glaring eyes. His body was strong, and sharp, like a blade. He controlled a vast amount of power with an ironclad will. When he started a fight, he would chase his adversary to the ends of the earth to finish it.

He was also the collector of the debt the brothers owed.

Bloody shortsword in hand, Dortin ran off as fast as his legs would carry him.

(To be continued)

Afterword

"I still think it's weird to put an 'afterword' in the middle of a two-parter, but I can't think of a better title for it, so that's what it's gonna be, I guess. If anything, I guess this is like an intermission soliloquy note or something. I mean, I am all alone. The author is bringing you this afterword all by himself, without any other characters. So, we're at the end of volume 11 of the series now..."

"...You did that joke last time, too."

"Ugh?! ...B-But... I was just about to talk about how we're finally starting the second part of the story, and it's gonna be really hard, too..."

"Yeah, you did that, too."

"...I'm sorry, who are you?"

"Eris. From this book."

"I see..."

"..."

"Umm..."

"Yes?"

"Do you mind if I say something?"

"That's your job, isn't it?"

"Yes. I'm sorry... Wait, why do I have to bow my head to a character I created myself?!"

"Nobody's making you. It's not like I asked."

"...I guess that's true. Umm, well, hello, it's the author, same as always. I'm thankful for our continued relationship, dear reader (deeply)."

"Deeply what? Stabbing deeply?"

"No! ...Just be quiet, okay?"

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Geez (grumble). ...Uhh, well, it’s been a pretty long time since we last spoke, huh? We’re finally starting part 2 of the story, finally getting to the frantic story I’ve got planned.”

“Well, it’s the readers who decide that, isn’t it? Not you.”

“...Well, since we’re starting part 2! Let’s have a bit of a long afterword, in widescreen, with no cuts and no commercials!”

“Gotta make up for the short page count of the story, huh?”

“...(staring)”

“So?”

“Sob sob (crying). Dammit, I’m not gonna lose. Well, getting back to the story, like I said before, the second part of the story is the eastern part, so the whole group will be moving southward down the eastern half of the continent from here on. Although... to be honest, I kind of feel like the readers are more knowledgeable about the story than me at this point (lol).”

“Crying, laughing... It’s hard on the characters when the writer’s such a kid...”

“Uuugh... I feel like a new wife being teased by my mother-in-law...”

“Ah... I hear that’s a real incredible world that a man honestly can’t understand...”

“Oh? But I bet even saying that is sexist, too. I’m trying to be careful about that, but it really is hard, isn’t it? What do you say, T-jima-san?”

“Who the heck’s T-jima? And you’re getting off-topic. Shouldn’t you get back on topic before people start to think you’re just trying to pad the page count?”

“...Should we take roll?”

“I think you should stop before people catch on that you’re plagiarizing.”

“Guess so. Anyway! We just started part two and we’re already doing a two-parter! It’s not like I got a taste for them last time or anything. If anything, I was more like, ‘I’m never gonna do this again,’ but... Hmm... well, I don’t know if it’ll make sense if I explain it, but it’s sort of like I’ve realized this aspect of myself

lately...”

“Aspect?”

“Mmmm, a couple times now, I’ve gone, ‘I’m gonna do a light story~,’ and then haven’t really followed through on that. I think it’s just because I’m exceeding my limits.”

“Your limits?”

“Yeah. Like page count, for instance. I like writing gags in conversation, but if there’s no punchline, they never end. They just eat up pages. Then if I add a book’s worth of story to that, by the time the conflict’s appeared, the book’s too full to resolve it because of the unrelated stuff. And that’s fine, but if I try to cram two books’ worth of stuff into one volume, I don’t have enough room to play around as much as I want to.”

“...Sounds to me like the only reason you can’t take it easy is because you’re worrying about stupid stuff like that.”

“Oh, shut up. Anyway, that’s how it is. Basically, I just decided to make you guys all go along with my selfishness this time. I think in the end it’ll be an interesting story... probably, so please just bear with the wait for the second volume (bow).”

“Uhh, and if you’ve already read through the book, I just want to warn you guys not to expect an actual mystery from this half-ass author.”

“...Well... there’s not much I can say to that...”

“I mean, he’s the type that’ll say Professor Bingo’s Snuff when you ask him what his favorite trick is.”

“Lay off. I like it.”

“Well, it’s not like I particularly care... So? How’ve you been doing lately?”

“Uhh... I bought a laptop?”

“Even though you can barely use machines?”

“Oh, shut up. I’ll figure it out eventually. For now, I’m just trying to make sure I don’t drop it.”

“Wow, you’re struggling with some real fundamentals here, huh?”

“I’ve figured out how to turn the power on and off and reset it when it freezes without panicking too much, so I think I’ll be fine...”

“That’s *real* encouraging.”

“It’s realistic, okay? I don’t have time to read through the instruction manual back-to-back and experiment.”

“The downfall of technological civilization ends with a surplus of these types, I bet.”

“Don’t talk about people like they’re algae...”

“Anything else happening lately?”

“I don’t know what to say. I’ve just had my nose to the grindstone on my manuscript. I guess I cleared The 4th Survivor recently.”

“...I’m not going to point out the contradiction between those two sentences. You’ve got a pretty boring life, don’t you?”

“Whaddya want from me?”

“How about something fun, like you got in a car accident, or you thought you won the lottery but on your way home you got hit by a black Mercedes-Benz, or you saw a demon flying super fast through the eastern sky or something?”

“I feel like those are all bad things... Well, I dunno about the demon, I guess.”

“And your taxes? Anything there?”

“It’d be bad if there was, wouldn’t it?”

“...Okay. You can go home.”

“Why?!”

“Just joking.”

“Oh, that’s right. There’s this new barbershop a little ways out from the station.”

“...And?”

“Well, it’s way cheaper than the one near the station.”

“And?”

“Maybe I’ll go there next time.”

“...”

“...”

“Hurry up and go home already.”

“Why?!”

“Well, this was the extra-long afterword of volume 11—”

“Hey, you can’t just end this with a nice business smile!”

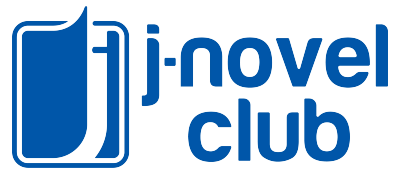
“Brought to you by this stupid author and me, Eris. Well, let’s meet again in part two.”

“What’s stupid supposed to mean, huh?!”

“Okay~, see you♪”

“Don’t run away, dammmiiiiit!”

Yoshinobu Akita, March 1998



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